

BY JEFF SKIVER

My New Apprentice

It's hard to teach a new dog the old dog's tricks.

My woodshop is a frustrating place to be at the moment. I am breaking in a new apprentice, and he and I are having issues. We are not communicating well. He gives me looks that seem to question my authority, my intellect and my woodworking skill. When I opened the shop to a new apprentice, there were specific things I was looking for, and Peyton seemed to be the ideal candidate. Now, I just can't help but wonder if Peyton is going to be the apprentice I need.

Looking back, it seems my former apprentice, Simon, was a top-notch performer. When there was work to do, he was always in the shop, and I do not recall Simon ever disagreeing with me. Had we ever encountered a disagreement I had a foolproof plan: RPS (Rock-Paper-Scissors). Since ancient times, man has cast lots to help in decision making, but I always knew if Simon and I disagreed, we would just do RPS to decide who was right. Then, once the RPS began, I would just keep throwing out "paper" and wait for Simon to put out "the rock." I was sure of victory, because it was impossible for Simon to ever play "scissors." See, Simon was a yellow Labrador retriever. You heard it here first, people ... if you ever need to settle a dispute with a dog, just play Rock-Paper-Scissors and keep going with "paper." Let me add, though, that I never had to resort to that method with Simon; we never disagreed.

Simon and I knew our individual roles in the shop. I would select wood, prepare rough lumber, saw, plane, shape, join, cut, chisel, scrape, sand and finish. Simon would lie on the floor and occasionally let out a deep sigh. He was not lazy, though. He put a great deal of effort into positioning himself to always be in the action. Simon added a little adventure to woodworking. He forced me to find a way to safely finish each cut while leaning over

110 pounds of yellow fur parked at the base of my Unisaw. He improved my band sawing by helping me to steady my stance as he placed his head on my foot.

If I sneaked off to the shop without him, I could hand sand or handplane boards in solitude. However, if the dust collector roared or a mallet whacked a chisel, the sound would alert Simon and he would stroll into the shop with



an incredulous look that said, "What are you doing in here without me?!?! We're supposed to be partners!!" Then, he would plop down at my feet and let out that heavy sigh.

Simon was a hand-tool expert, and he oversaw my planing by judging the shavings that would fall off the workbench and gather in his fur. When it was time to rehone the edge of a plane iron, he would walk with me over to the sharpening station while giving me a look that said, "Yeah; I would touch up that edge, too, if I were you."

I didn't plan to need a new apprentice

for several years. However, in January 2007, Simon suddenly developed acute pancreatitis and passed away at the age of 6¹/₂. He was supposed to have been with me at least twice as long as he actually was.

Four months after losing Simon, my wife and I went and selected the new yellow Lab apprentice. I chose the "alpha male" of the litter because I thought he would be the least intimidated by the noise of the shop. I have worked to get him accustomed to the shop, but he refuses to lie there and bask in the glory of my woodworking greatness the way Simon did. Instead, with Peyton, if things get quiet, I have to suddenly look around to find out what he has found to chew on. So far he has only left teeth marks in raw lumber, but I know one of these days he is going to leave his signature on something with a name like Blue Spruce, Bridge City or Lie-Nielsen. It would almost be worth it, however, if I could just get him to embrace the time in the shop the way Simon did.

This afternoon, I spent four quiet hours cleaning and organizing my woodshop. It was an incredibly efficient time, but 5-month-old Peyton was nowhere to be found. He was upstairs with my wife showing off his bi-polar puppy nature as he moved back and forth between napping and desperately seeking attention.

The shop was lonely. There were no heavy sighs. There was never a head resting on my foot. There was not a single shared glance where my apprentice's big brown eyes told me that the gaps in my dovetails were as beautiful to him as a Sam Maloof rocker. There was no Simon, and my shop just wasn't all it should have been. **PW**

Jeff designs car parts for a living, but spends a lot of time writing his new blog at jeffskiver.blogspot.com. In his spare time, he heads for the woodshop.