REALISTIC TRACK BALLASTING

By Bill Neale, MMR

I think ballast can add the right tone and texture to our model track and it sends a message to the observers' brains as to whether this is a model or a toy. I’m not trying to be elitist, but I have seen some wonderful layouts that just missed getting to the next level simply because the owner failed to get the right look to his track. Now most of you are probably aware of these ideas, so please don’t take offense if you think I am preaching to the choir. I thought I would collect some of the approaches I have used to make my track look better.

Step one is always to paint the sides of the rails. Mainline rails should be a dark grey-dark rust color. Sidings and other less used track should be painted with lighter shades of the same colors. I prefer colors more into the rust-red range, but darker burnt umber tones are also very realistic. Rails can be painted after ballasting, but you have to be more careful not to get paint all over the stones. On real track, rusty colors do bleed into the ballast, so either approach has its advocates. What is important is to eliminate the unrealistic bright silver rail sides. It is also important to kill the plastic sheen of the flex track ties by painting them a grey or dark brown color with a spray. You can spray the whole track structure with Floquil Rail-Brown so that both the rails and the ties are the same color. This works very well and is the quickest way to get the colors right. Watch out for the overspray if the track is already in place (don’t ask me how I know this, because it’s a sad story about having to repaint a nicely weathered brass steam engine).

Like many of the eastern railroads, the PRR used limestone ballast on their main tracks. I use the Woodland Scenics grey blend, which has both lighter and darker grey particles. I think High Ball products has something similar. I buy both the medium sized stuff and the fine stuff, and then mix it in equal parts in a large dispenser. I don’t want too uniform a look, so this mix works pretty well. When ballasting, no stones should be on top of the ties or adhering to the sides of the rails. That is hard to do so I usually have to clean and “de-stone” after the water/alcohol/cement mixture dries. Then about 2 months later I inspect the track and find more stones still glued to the wrong place, ugh!

I prefer the Woodland Scenics cement over diluted white glue. The W.S. cement is diluted matte medium (I think), and it dries flexible. White glue dries rigid, and acts as a sound board, making the trains a little noisier. White glue is also harder to remove if you change your mind. I pour the W.S. cement into an old Elmer’s bottle (one of the medium sized glue bottles with the closeable tips). To apply, I wet the ballast with some alcohol and then I drip the cement onto the wetted ballast using the small tip on the glue bottle. There are probably a dozen ways to do the ballasting, mine is just one.

All other track that is not main track was usually ballasted with the free stuff the railroad had in abundance during steam days.
cinders! Any fine cinder product is good to use for this. Don’t use any medium cinders for HO scale, because it will look like coal. All yard tracks, engine terminal tracks, and secondary running tracks like passing sidings got cinders. Some well used passing siding would get stone ballast, but that track was rarely cleaned, so the stone ballast soon was hard to distinguish from cinder ballast.

Many industrial sidings started with cinder ballast, but over time, dirt built up around the rails, so if you look at most industrial tracks, you will see mostly earth colors. And sometimes weeds.

Two more tricks I use to get the right appearance for yard and industrial tracks. First, when the cinders or earth material is still wet, press it down with a pallet knife. Start with working down the center of the tracks. This flattens and squeezes the scenic material, so there is less “bumpiness” to the surface. Work all around the track and, if needed, across a whole parking lot and adjacent driveways. The stuff we use for ballast, which is ground up nut shells, will float on the ballast cement slightly, and will dry bumpy. Pressing the material with the pallet knife causes the particles to squeeze down into a more uniform and smoother surface, which is much more scale in appearance.

The second trick is to lightly sand dried areas. This can work very well on older sceniced areas that you want to rehabilitate and make the surface smoother. I use a fine foam sanding block (found in most paint departments) and lightly rub the top of the cinders. It can lighten the color of the surface, turning deep black areas into more accurately colored black/grey/brown surfaces which are more like what we see in real life. The foam block will flex around rails and can be used to sand down the middle of tracks. You can also use the edge of the block to help define tire ruts on dirt roads. Leave the center of the road course, but sand down the ruts where the tires roll. Done lightly, the effect can be stunningly realistic. If you like the look right after sanding, re-wet the area and add more scenic cement to keep the sanding dust in place, otherwise the next vacuuming might partially undo that nicely weathered driveway. Good luck to you!