

They Make Such a Cute Couple, Don't They?

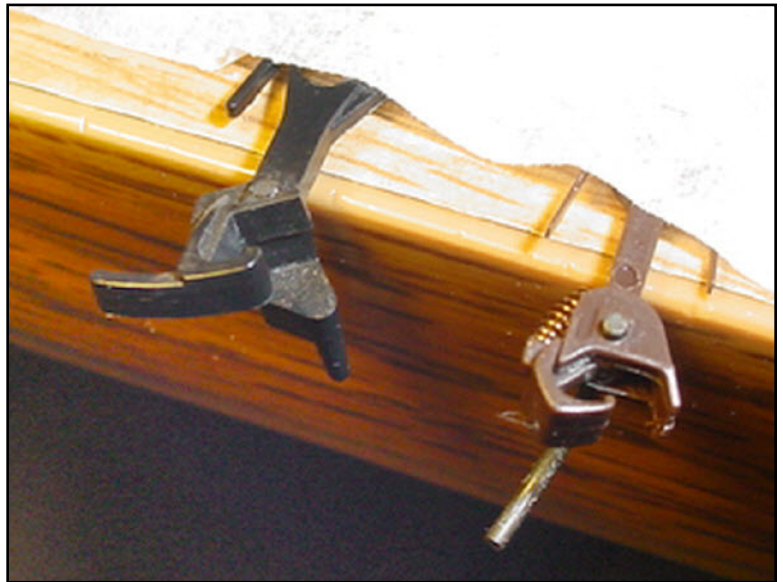
In case you are not entirely up to speed on couplers, this brief explanation will give you some helpful background. But please remember that in railroad modeling as in all avocations, you won't have to look too long before you find controversy and passionately held views. And so, to all who read this and disagree with me, I say, "You are right, I am wrong and I take it all back."

Looking at HO model railroading as it stands in the opening of the year 2009, there are basically two kinds of couplers in common use: the "horn and hook," which appears on the left in the photo and the "knuckle" which is to the right of it. If you are familiar with the appearance of a real-world coupler, you will immediately perceive that the knuckle is the more realistic of the two. And you can also see how they got their names. Had it been left to me, I would have called them "Claw" and "Fist," but that's just me.

Historically, there had always been a problem in making couplers which were BOTH realistic AND operationally convenient and reliable. The horn and hook was "as good as it got" for many years, until Kadee introduced its version of a knuckle coupler. The Kadee folks, ever mindful of their own economic fortunes, wisely patented their design. Accordingly, until sometime about the turn of the century, when the patent ran out, Kadee was the only widely available alternative to horn and hook.

But when the patent DID run out, all kinds of KD "knock-offs" were introduced under a variety of names. There is a very excellent review by Jim Hediger in the November 2007 edition of *Model Railroader*, entitled "HO Scale Magnetic Knuckle Couplers A Survey of the Current Crop of Couplers." All the major brands are compared for sheer brute strength under load, and performance under a variety of conditions, such as coupling and uncoupling on curves. In a nutshell: Kadee wins by a wide margin.

But that's not to say all the others should be written off. The answer to the "Which one is RIGHT for me?" question is not necessarily the same as the answer to the "Which one is best?" question. The answer truly is, "It depends." And what it depends on is the kind of rail modeling you are doing. If you basically are deploying a layout as a pleasing diorama that captures a certain look and serves as a diversion for you and friends or family, I lean toward "not" Kadee because of the cost. But if you are modeling realistic operations in which reliability approaching perfection is essential -such as a club- then Kadee is a very rational choice. Another factor is standardization. While all knuckle couplers work on the same principles generally, using just ONE kind for all cars will work the best. That said, many modelers are buying new rolling stock, selling old, refining their rosters over time. Does it make sense to undertake the expense of the reputed best coupler upgrade for an item which you may no longer use in the near future? That's something for YOU to decide.



All that said, among the closest competitors to the Kadee is the McHenry product. Athearn, in fact, has standardized on it. The E-Z Mate product from Bachmann is essentially a carbon-copy of the McHenry, made by Bachmann under license from McHenry. To my mind, therefore, the E-Z Mate is a good, cost-effective alternative to the Kadee in most cases, which is why I deploy them for the rolling stock I offer for sale on Ebay and elsewhere. The “Mark II” series is the particular version I prefer, because it incorporates a special coil spring retainer that helps keep the spring from escaping. That tiny spring is the *dickens* to replace, so anything that prevents it from flying away is an advantage.

Finally, I have standardized on the E-Z Mate because I really don't know about my customer's modeling preferences and the situation in which rolling stock that I sell will be deployed. If the layout is operated by youngsters, for example, the exposure of a costly Kadee product might not be a good idea. On the other hand, the experienced and devoted modeler is likely to make all kinds of customizations to the product I sell -couplers included. It would make no sense to increase the base cost of the entire product simply to anticipate the preference of a highly skilled modeler. Better, I think, to offer merchandise which is ready to operate, of consistent quality, reliable under most operating conditions, reasonably priced, and readily adapted to the particular preferences of the buyer. For those who favor Kadee, I offer that product separately as stock becomes available.

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