Episode Book

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Why Your Trackpad Clicks Stopped Working

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SYNOPSIS

Daniel's ThinkPad trackpad clicks stopped registering, so he opened it up, checked the battery, blew out some dust, and closed it — and now it's worse. This episode unpacks why "cursor works, clicks don't" is the signature of a swollen battery, not a dead trackpad, and why the visual check almost always fails. We walk through the millimeter of clearance between the click plate and the battery, the Framework and Dell owners who replaced the wrong part first, and why the E15's keyboard, trackpad, and power button are all one loaded stack. Plus: why the cheap washer and loose-screw fixes are masking a fire risk, and the reassembly order that matters more than you'd think.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Okay. A laptop that was already limping... and then it got worse in the one way that stings, which is that the owner did the careful thing.



Herman

The careful thing being, he opened it up and looked.



Corn

Right. Here's what Daniel wrote in. A week or so back, the trackpad button on his ThinkPad E15 just popped out. He's had a couple of dead arrow keys for longer than that, that problem predates the trackpad one. The trackpad surface itself is fine, he can scroll, cursor moves, no problem. It's the clicks. Bottom-left, bottom-right, nothing registers. So the laptop is effectively unusable, because if you can't click, you can't do anything. He'd heard the swollen battery theory before, so he opened the case, had a look at the battery, and it looked fine to him. Gave the inside a blast of compressed air, closed it up. And now it's worse. The trackpad won't seat at all, the power button needs real force to actuate, keys are misbehaving. His read is that it's entirely mechanical, that the keyboard and trackpad stack isn't pushing through the plastic frame correctly. And the question he's asking is the practical one. Before he takes it to a shop, what's the general first thing to try to reseat it?



Herman

Entirely mechanical is a feeling. It's a very reasonable feeling, and it might be half right. But the most common cause of this exact symptom is the thing he already looked at and ruled out.



Corn

So the question is whether Daniel's instinct is right, or whether it's the most common trap in laptop repair.



Herman

The trap. Which is that a battery that looks fine is not a battery that is fine.



Corn

Let's start with the mechanism, because the split between the cursor working and the click not working is the whole diagnosis.



Herman

It really is. A dead trackpad usually means a dead trackpad. If the controller's gone, or the ribbon's severed, or the driver's broken, nothing works. No cursor, no scroll, no click. That's not what he has. He has a trackpad whose capacitive surface is functioning perfectly and whose physical click has stopped. Those are two different systems sharing one piece of glass.



Corn

Explain the two systems.



Herman

The top layer is capacitive. It's a grid of sensors that reads where your finger is and reports coordinates. It doesn't move. It doesn't need to move. It sits there and it senses. That's why scrolling works and the cursor tracks. The second system is the click. And the click is mechanical. On most of these, the trackpad is a hinged plate. There's a switch underneath, or a pair of switches, one toward the bottom-left, one toward the bottom-right, and when you press down, the plate travels, it hits the switch, the switch closes, and the machine registers a click.



Corn

And the plate needs room to travel.



Herman

It needs about a millimeter. That number comes out of a Dell XPS thread from a few years back, and the phrasing in it is worth keeping, because the person writing it was very precise about it. The gap between the underside of the touchpad and the battery is very small and very critical. The touchpad needs a good millimeter or so to be free between it and the battery, so that when you press the touchpad, the bottom of it has some room to move.



Corn

A millimeter.



Herman

That's the whole budget. That's the clearance on a thin laptop between the bottom of the click plate and the top of the battery. And the battery sits directly under it. Not off to the side, not behind it. Directly underneath, because that's the biggest flat void in the chassis and the battery is the biggest flat object that goes in it.



Corn

So if the battery grows at all...



Herman

It eats the millimeter. And it doesn't take much. Lithium-ion cells swell when they gas off, and they gas off for a lot of reasons, age, overcharge, heat, a knock. The cell doesn't need to visibly balloon. It needs to gain a fraction of a millimeter of thickness and the plate is now resting on it. And then you press, and the plate can't travel, so the switch never closes, so the click never registers. Meanwhile the capacitive layer is sitting right there on top, completely unaffected, because it never needed to move in the first place.



Corn

So the surface works and the click doesn't. Which is exactly what Daniel described.



Herman

Exactly what he described. And this is the part I'd underline for him. That specific combination, cursor fine, scroll fine, clicks dead, is the signature. It's not a trackpad failure. It's a travel failure.



Corn

Say more about why the visual check is such a trap, because he did look.



Herman

He did look, and that's the thing. Swelling is often imperceptible. This is stressed over and over in the threads where people actually solved this. There's a Framework 13 owner, Richard Fullford, and his sequence is almost a mirror of Daniel's. His touchpad buttons started getting harder to click. So he did the logical thing, he replaced the touchpad. Didn't fix it. Then he noticed the input cover wasn't seating properly. Then he found the battery was swelling. And replacing the battery fixed the touchpad.



Corn

He replaced the trackpad first.



Herman

Which is the expensive version of this mistake. And then there's a second Framework user, Caleb Land, who had keyboard keys firing when the case flexed. Traced it to battery swelling. Pulled the battery, the key problem went away, and he noted the touchpad was not sitting flat with the case. Not sitting flat. That's the tell.



Corn

And this isn't a ThinkPad thing.



Herman

It's not a ThinkPad thing at all. Framework 13, Dell XPS 15, MacBook Pro, HP. There are documented threads on all of them where the trackpad buttons stopped clicking and the answer was the battery. It's a near-universal consequence of how thin laptops are built. The battery goes directly under the trackpad with almost no clearance, on basically every machine. The E15 isn't special. It's just another instance of the same layout.



Corn

Which means the design flaw is the layout itself.



Herman

The layout is the flaw. You've got a component that's expected to expand slightly over its life, sitting a millimeter underneath a component that requires a millimeter of clearance to function. That's not a robust arrangement. It works fine for three years and then it doesn't, and when it stops working, it presents as a trackpad problem, so people replace the trackpad.



Corn

And the safety side of this.



Herman

The safety side is not subtle. Engadget ran a piece on exactly this last week, and the line in it is blunt. A trackpad that pops out is usually a sign that your battery is nearing the end of its life. And then the warning, which is the part that matters. Stop using it immediately. Turn it off, unplug it. A faulty battery can swell to the point where it explodes. The risk of it bursting into flames is very real. Computer Hope puts it the same way from the other direction, swelling causes the laptop keyboard, touchpad, or case to protrude or split apart.



Corn

So the popped-out trackpad isn't a trackpad coming loose. It's the case being pushed open from inside.



Herman

That's the reframe. The trackpad didn't pop out. The battery pushed it out. And Daniel's description, the button seemed to just randomly pop out, that's the event. That's the moment the swelling crossed the threshold and the plate got shoved past its clips.



Corn

Which brings up the cheap fixes people find, because I know what's out there.



Herman

You do. Dell users have had success putting thin M2 nylon washers under the battery screw holes, which lifts the battery a hair and restores the clearance. Nylon specifically, so that if one drops inside the machine it can't short anything. And one person suggested leaving the two center bottom-case screws a full turn loose, so the case can flex outward instead of the trackpad bulging.



Corn

Those are workarounds.



Herman

They're workarounds, and I'd say it plainly. If the battery is swelling, both of those mask a fire risk. You're restoring clearance by making room for a cell that's still growing. You've bought yourself a trackpad that clicks and a battery that keeps expanding inside a sealed plastic box.



Corn

Don't do that one. So if the battery is the usual suspect, why did opening the case and blowing out dust make it worse? That's the part of Daniel's story that's actually the most informative.



Herman

It is, and it's the part he's reading as bad luck. It isn't bad luck. Something changed when he closed it, and the change is a clue.



Corn

Walk me through the E15's actual construction, because I think people picture a keyboard as a part you drop in.



Herman

It isn't on this machine. On the E15 Gen 2, the models 20T8, 20T9, 20TD, 20TE, the keyboard is integrated into the upper case. It's part of the palmrest assembly. It's secured to the chassis with multiple screws and metallic retention brackets, and it connects through a low-profile ribbon cable to a ZIF connector. And the palmrest-with-keyboard is sold as a single field replaceable unit. One part number. You don't buy a keyboard, you buy the whole top deck.



Corn

And the trackpad?



Herman

The trackpad is its own sub-assembly. It's held by four screws, 2.4 millimeter Phillips number one, with a locking-flap ribbon connector. The battery is five screws, 5.7 millimeter Phillips number one, and a pull-out connector. And the lower case, the bottom panel, is eight captive Phillips number one screws plus a ring of plastic clips around the perimeter.



Corn

Eight screws and a ring of clips.



Herman

And here's where the reassembly matters. The iFixit guide's reassembly note is very specific about the order. Place the lower case on top of all the clips and push down around the edges until all the clips are engaged. Clips first, then screws. If you lay the case down and start driving screws, you can pull the panel down tight on four or five screws while half the clips around the rim are still standing proud, and now the whole deck is being held at a slight angle.



Corn

And the deck is the palmrest, the keyboard, and the trackpad.



Herman

All one stack. So if the case goes back on unevenly, that stack is under uneven pressure. Which means the trackpad plate might now be pinched at one corner and free at another, and the click travel changes. It might now be pressed harder against a battery that's already too close. And the power button, which sits in that same upper-case assembly, is now being actuated through a deck that's loaded differently than it was.



Corn

Which is why the power button feel changed.



Herman

A correctly seated case should not change how the power button feels. That's the diagnostic point. If the power button got heavier, the deck moved. Something about how it's sitting is different from how it was sitting before.



Corn

And this is where the FRU ordering is interesting, because Lenovo's own manual puts the power button in that chain.



Herman

It does. The hardware maintenance manual lists them in sequence. Eleven-ten, power button and fingerprint reader module and cable. Eleven-twenty, coin-cell battery. Eleven-thirty, trackpad cable and trackpad. Eleven-fifty, system board. Eleven-sixty, keyboard assembly. The power button is in the same assembly chain as the keyboard and the trackpad. So when Daniel says the power button feels weird and the trackpad won't seat and keys are misbehaving, he's describing three symptoms from one stack under one set of pressures. It's not three failures.



Corn

It's one failure with three faces.



Herman

One stack, unevenly loaded.



Corn

So the compressed air. Is that the culprit?



Herman

The air itself isn't dangerous. Compressed air is fine for dust. What matters is that the case was open and the stack was disturbed. If a ribbon cable was only partially seated, a blast of air can move it. If a clip was marginal, the panel coming off and going back on can finish it. And if the battery was already swelling, then the deck went back down onto a battery that had grown since the machine was assembled, and now it's being compressed harder than it ever was at the factory.



Corn

So the reassembly didn't break it. It revealed it.



Herman

That's the way I'd put it. The machine was already in a marginal state. Opening it and closing it moved the margin.



Corn

Which brings us to the actual question, which is what to try first.



Herman

Four things, in order, and the order matters because the first one is free and the last one is a shop visit.



Corn

Go.



Herman

One. Reopen the case and check the clips. Not the screws first, the clips. Get the panel off, look at the rim, and when you put it back, seat it on all the clips and press down around the entire perimeter until every clip engages before you touch a screw. Then the eight captive screws, evenly snug. Not torqued down. Evenly snug. If you've got one screw cranked and the rest loose, you've built a twist into the deck.



Corn

Two.



Herman

Two. Check the battery properly. And I want to be clear that looking at it is not checking it. Lay a straightedge across the top of the pack and look for daylight under the middle. Better, pull the battery and set it on something flat, a glass table or a stone countertop, and see if it rocks. And check whether the trackpad sits flat in its recess with the machine closed, because if the plate is proud of the palmrest, something underneath is pushing it.



Corn

Three.



Herman

Three. Reseat the trackpad ribbon. Flip the ZIF locking flap up, pull the cable, look at the contacts, put it back square, push the flap down until it latches. Then verify the four trackpad screws are all present and snug. If one's missing, the plate is hinging on three points instead of four and the click geometry is wrong.



Corn

And four.



Herman

Four. Verify the keyboard ribbon. Same procedure, different connector. Fully seated, fully latched. And if all four of those don't fix it, then you're into part replacement, and that's the point where I'd stop.



Corn

What's the stop signal?



Herman

Any sign of swelling at all, you stop immediately. Not after you've tried the reseat. Immediately. Engadget, Micro Center, Computer Hope, they all say the same thing. Turn it off, unplug it, don't keep using it, take it in. A swollen cell that gets punctured or compressed is a fire. That's not a cautious position, that's just the physics.



Corn

And if there's no swelling and the reseat doesn't work?



Herman

Then you're looking at replacing the trackpad as a part, which is a moderate job, or the whole palmrest and keyboard assembly, and that one's rated at about two to three hours, moderate to high difficulty, because you're moving the system board to do it. At that point the question stops being a repair question and becomes an economics question, which is a different conversation.



Corn

And there's a practical problem with all of this. How do you actually check a battery that looks fine?



Hilbert

You can't do it on a carpet.



Corn

...Go on.



Hilbert

I worked a drop-off site for about eighteen months. People bring in swollen phone batteries and laptop packs in zip-lock bags, and you triage them. You've got a bench, you've got a fire box, you've got a form to fill in. I've handled more swollen lithium than most people have seen.



Herman

And the visual check.



Hilbert

The visual check is what everybody does and it's the thing that misses. You get a pack on the bench and it looks flat. Looks completely flat. Then you lay it on the granite and it rocks. That's it. That's the whole test. There's a curve in it you can't see and you can feel it the second it's on a hard flat surface. On a desk with a bit of give, on a carpet, on a mouse



Hilbert (continued)

mat, it sits there looking innocent.



Corn

The granite countertop.



Hilbert

Any stone counter, any glass table. Something you know is flat and something that won't flex under the pack. You set it down and you press the corners and you watch for the rock. If it rocks, it's curved, and if it's curved it's gassing, and if it's gassing it's done. You don't need a meter. You need a kitchen.



Herman

That's better than what I gave him. I said straightedge. This is the same idea but it's the version that actually works in a house.



Hilbert

The straightedge works if you've got a good one and a light behind it. The counter works every time.



Corn

What else.



Hilbert

The air bothers me. The can. You had the lid off, you're holding a can, you're blowing dust out of a fan housing, and the whole deck is loose in your other hand. Nothing's where it was when you started. That's not a mistake, that's just what happens when you open a laptop. But now you've got a machine where the panel's been off and on, and the first thing you should do is assume nothing's seated, including the things you didn't touch.



Herman

Which is exactly the order we gave. Clips, battery, cables.



Hilbert

Clips first. Everybody goes for the screws. The clips are the part that's actually holding the shape.



Corn

How many of these did you see come in where the owner had already had a go at it?



Hilbert

Most of them. And the ones that came in untouched were usually the easy ones. The ones where somebody had been in there with a can of air and a set of drivers, those took longer, because you're not diagnosing the original fault anymore, you're diagnosing the original fault plus whatever happened after.



Hilbert

It's just what the work was. You'd open it up and you'd find the pack was curved and the trackpad screws were half out, and you'd never know which came first. Didn't matter. You'd swap the pack, you'd seat the deck properly, and it would go back out working.



Corn

And the ones you couldn't fix.



Hilbert

A few. You'd get a pack that had been sat on, or one that had been in a drawer for two years, and the swelling had gone far enough that it had pushed the deck out of shape. Plastic takes a set. You can put a new battery in and the panel still won't sit right because the panel's bent now. That's the one you can't undo.



Corn

So the timing matters.



Hilbert

Timing's the whole thing. The earlier it comes in, the less there is to put back.



Corn

Which brings us back to the thing Daniel can't answer from where he's sitting.



Herman

Whether his battery is actually flat. He looked at it, and looking isn't testing. He needs it on a hard flat surface before he can say anything about it at all.



Corn

The cutting-room floor. The one detail I couldn't fit anywhere. Apple charges between a hundred and forty-nine and two hundred and forty-nine dollars for a MacBook battery replacement, and more if the trackpad got damaged in the process. Which tells you the failure mode is common enough that they've priced the collateral.



Herman

They've priced the collateral. That's the tell.



Corn

The bigger thing here is that this isn't a ThinkPad flaw. It's a design pattern. On nearly every thin laptop made, the battery sits directly under the trackpad with about a millimeter of clearance. The symptom is mechanical. The cause is chemical. That gap between how a failure feels and what it actually is, that's the thing worth sitting with.



Herman

And it gets narrower. As machines get thinner, that clearance shrinks, and the window between the battery starting to swell and the trackpad going dead gets shorter. The early warning system is the trackpad. And almost everybody will read it as a trackpad problem.



Corn

Which is the whole trap in one sentence. Thanks to producer Hilbert Flumingtop. This has been My Weird Prompts. If you've got a machine that's failed in an interesting way, email us at show at my weird prompts dot com.



Herman

We'll be back soon.