

## Wireless Communication Devices for Arena Lessons

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By Margaret Freeman

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Radios are useful tools at horse shows where the warm-up ring is lined with trainers all attempting to coach individual riders in the swirling crowd. The rider doesn’t have to try to pick out his own trainer’s voice or wait for the few seconds that he passes that section of the rail. The trainer doesn’t have to get hoarse from shouting instructions across the ring.

Trainers who teach all day can also benefit using radios, since they can stay in one place and still be heard without shouting. But even if you’re teaching two lessons a day or taking one lesson a week, you’ll appreciate a wireless radio since it’s simply easier to hear. We found both coaches and riders were more relaxed when using a wireless radio.



**How They Work.** Different types of radios suit different needs. Wireless radios that are useful for equestrians can be one-way (the coach talks and the rider listens but can’t talk back) or two-way (the coach and rider can talk to each other). Two-way radios work either alternately, like a walkie-talkie, or simultaneously, like on a phone.

The technology depends on whether the radio uses one frequency or two. One-way radios and two-way radios that alternate the transmission (you need to say, “over”) use a single frequency, called “simplex”. Radios that are voice-activated (VOX) and click on with a brief time delay when they detect sound are also on a single frequency. Two-way radios that transmit simultaneously (like a phone) use two frequencies,

called “full-duplex”.

A voice activated radio can raise the frustration level of a rider. There’s a time delay between when you start to speak and then actually transmit. Ambient noise such as wind or clothes rustling against the unit can activate it.

Walkie-talkies are occasionally seen hooked on boots. They’re inexpensive, starting below \$50, can be long-range and last 40 hours on a set of batteries. However, the talk button usually has to be held down by the coach to transmit, which makes them awkward to use for any long period.

Radios marketed specifically for riders start around \$300 and easily reach \$1,500 or higher depending on accessories.

The Eartec and Comtek systems are commonly marketed for riding. ***Eartec is a full-duplex (two-way) system, starting at \$300.*** Comtek is one-way, so the rider can’t talk back to the coach (maybe a good thing?). It starts at \$1,100.

***We found both systems easy to use, even for total techno-phobes. The sound was clear, better than with the usual cell phone, across a large ring.*** We also used them over hunter-type jumps and at distances up to

300 yards, which made the issue moot for instruction since we couldn't see the rider anymore.

The most complicated thing about starting out with each system is setting it up for the rider – deciding where to place the receiver on the rider, how to anchor the headset so it stayed in place, and what to do with the cord that runs from the receiver to headset or earloop.



We used both the Eartec and Comtek systems in our trial.

**How To Wear Them.** The wires on these systems are so thin that they'll likely break if caught on anything, or else they'll pull out of the unit, so that's not a concern for safety. The one aspect of safety that bothers us is that we see many riders at shows wearing the unit at the center of their backs. This is simply a bad idea – if a rider falls and lands flat on his back he could bruise his spine, or worse, just as he would if he landed there on a rock.

It's much safer to set the radio off to the side if worn in back, but that can also lead to a bruised rib in a fall. A safer place to locate the unit is in the front and slightly to the side, either on the belt or in a pocket. We noticed on rider at a show who placed her radio on her upper arm in a cell-phone holder.

We found that riders who are long-waisted (as are most men) don't have enough room for the unit to clear the saddle if worn in front and thus need to position it off to the side in the back or maybe put it in a pocket. The wire can run up the back or under the arm. You don't want to bunch it up because it acts like an antenna.

Whether you prefer a headset or earloop may depend on the size and shape of your ears. Some people have ears that are just too small for an earloop to stay put when trotting and cantering. We found that even headsets that were too large and earloops that fell out when riding bearheaded ***stayed in place with a helmet and harness – they were so secure that we just forgot we were wearing one.***

We really liked a headset or earloop that had a little lapel clip on the cord, not so much to retrieve the headset if it came loose but to keep the unit itself from dropping. We neither wanted to retrieve something on horseback or drop a unit on the barn floor while on the ground if we didn't get it clipped properly on the belt.



If you prefer to wear the receiver in the back, put it off to the side.

**Using The Systems.** Once you've got the ***Eartec system hooked up, you feel like you're talking on a hands-free cell phone – possibly with better sound quality.*** The one downside with a two-frequency device is that it sucks power and the manufacturer says you'll only get about 5 hours in a charge (we got 6 ½ hours).

You need to remember to turn it off or put it on standby to get through an entire day of teaching. It will last longer, 10 hours or more, if the rider turns off his mike so it's one-way.

An alternative is to keep a second set of transmitter / receivers charged up. Although it's more expensive, it's easier than swapping out the batteries from the awkward compartment in the

back. The channel changer, located under the battery is also in a difficult spot, but we didn't find that we needed to swap the channels during our trial.

The Eartec system picked up a little more ambient noise than the Comtek because it had two sets of mikes, but it didn't bother us. However, both the headset that came with the system and the optional earloop wouldn't stay put for us without a helmet harness in place. With the harness they were fine.

The Comtek system is clearly heavy-duty to match its price, and the switches are all easy to reach, including the channel charger. The sound quality is clear. If you don't mind the price and the fact that it's only one-way only, this is a great system. We found that the Sony earloops sit well on even small ears and the optional headset for the coach is also secure.

While this one-way system holds a charge for 40 hours, the batteries are a separate purchase, which builds up the cost. However, you may want to consider the Comtek if you anticipate that you'll need a heavy-duty system that can be expanded in a variety of ways.

If you're looking to take one of these systems to a show, check the rules of your discipline. It's fine for a dressage show – just remember to take it off before entering the competition ring. Communication devices aren't allowed at combined-training events without special permission first from the TD (technical delegate).



Yet another reason to wear a helmet: It helps hold the headset in place.

**Purchasing.** Wireless radios for riders can be found in equestrian catalogs, online and at tack shops. At one show, we saw a dealer renting sets for the day and refunding the rental with a purchase, which was a great opportunity to try it out. You can also buy directly from the manufacturer, who may be willing to customize your set with your choice of headsets and batteries.

You can replace any of the separate components in these sets through the manufacturer if one is broken or lost. There are also accessories so you can change or expand the systems. For example, **you can buy extra receivers so several people can listen in while one person transmits.**

You can also shop at electronics stores and online discount sites, but if you move away from a rider specific source, you need to be confident that the equipment you're choosing is suited for horseback, especially its size and weight.

As with anything in the electronics world now, the technology is changing rapidly. If you want a system but aren't quite ready to buy one yet, check back in a few months to see if there are any new radio toys to play with.

Bottom Line. Both these systems work well and are fun to use because they make hearing the coach so much easier. **We found we preferred the versatility of two-way transmission with the Eartec over the one-way Comtek system. And we really appreciated Eartec's price, making it both our top choice and best buy.**

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