

ON THE BALL

Roll up for Ian Hall's review of Marconi's RB2 Tracker Ball

Marconi RB2 Tracker Ball £59

IF you're fed up with wearing out your two typing fingers and are thinking about buying a device such as a mouse, then you might well consider the Marconi RB2 Tracker Ball.

The tracker ball was developed for military and industrial use and can give two dimensional manipulation which provides both fast movement and good fine control. This compares well with a joystick which can give the former but is not so hot on the latter. The way a tracker ball gives you both is by automatically providing good finger-tip control but it can be treated 'violently' and spun rapidly to move quickly. It consists of a free-moving ball, which when rotated horizontally and vertically can give the same control as a joystick. The inherent mass of the actual tracker ball assists in the fast movement—it can 'free wheel'.

It measures approximately 200mm by 110mm, is no taller than your Beeb, and does not look out of place beside it. The 'ball' part is about two-thirds the way up the face of the device, which is sloped so that the palm of your hand sits comfortably on the top and your fingers can easily manipulate the ball. Just above the ball are three buttons that can be put to various uses!

It plugs into the user port and, for the technically minded, relies on the use of the two interrupt lines. Marconi provides various pieces of software that allow you to use the Tracker Ball in different ways, plus a drawing/artist program — but more on that later.

On unpacking, the Tracker Ball gives the impression of a robust device, and a sneaky peek inside the unit shows a high standard of construction. The ball sits on two metal shafts at right angles to each other, and on the end of each is a small slotted disc, two optical pickoffs detect rotation of the discs and a small amount of electronics get the information in a form suitable for the Beeb.

I find the Tracker Ball a lot easier to



'Gives two dimensional manipulation which provides both fast movement and good fine control'

use than a mouse. You can get finer control without much arm movement. A big plus is that you don't need a clear flat area next to your Beeb. Its disadvantage is that you can't press the buttons and move the control with the same hand, but you should be able to overcome this if the software allows for it (Marconi please note).

The main software package consists of three utilities and a drawing program called *Paintball* on a cassette, plus a program to transfer them to disc.

Two utilities allow you to use the tracker ball in place of joysticks or cursor keys. The tracker ball and push buttons can be set up to emulate nearly any key on the keyboard. The third utility allows it to be used in your own programs, but the documentation on this facility was somewhat lacking. These utilities take up one page of memory—its location can be user-defined. This highlights what I consider to be the major limitation of the system — I would prefer the software to be resident in PROM, as with the AMX Mouse, and provide dedicated utilities.

The manual says you can use the utilities with a large amount of existing software but there is some trial and error involved in locating the utility so that it doesn't clash. However, there was no problem in getting it running with *Wordwise* or *View* and it proved quite useful in scanning documents.

The *Paintball* program is a drawing program in four colour mode 1 that is menu driven with the use of the Tracker

Ball. It provides the normal drawing functions such as circles, rubber lines, free-hand drawing, etc, and has an excellent fill routine. However, it only fills in solid colours and does not provide 'shading' which the AMX Mouse package does. A nice feature of the program is that it is written in Basic and a User function is provided on the menu. This calls any user-written procedure within the program and can be used for dedicated printer dump routines. On the not-so-good side, a major omission is that it does not ask you the familiar 'Are you sure?' when you select Clear Display, and so a slip of the finger could have you weeping over the keyboard. Also, the text facility is rather limited.

In addition to the cassette software, you also get an artists drawing program on disc. I'm afraid I cannot enthuse about this package which is about as user-friendly as an upside-down VDU (for example, you have to reply to five questions to draw a circle). The program doesn't use the Tracker Ball to its full potential and relies heavily on the keyboard.

To sum up, I consider the Marconi RB2 Tracker Ball a useful addition as it provides more control over the cursor than a mouse. Its major limitation is the lack of a utilities PROM such as the AMX system but there again, at £59 it's just a wee bit cheaper. Since it can successfully be used with user-friendly icon- and menu-based software I would hope that specialised software will appear soon.