

ENGL POWERBALL MK II HEAD \$1,599  
GUITAR AMPS



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## Engl Powerball Mk II head £1,599

The evolution of power... Engl's Powerball returns, updated, uprated and ready to rock *by Nick Guppy*

Engl may not be as well known in the UK as it deserves, but across the Channel and in the USA the brand is widely recognised for producing some of the best guitar amps your euro or dollar can buy, particularly if you're into rock or metal.

Engl can boast some serious endorsees too, such as Deep Purple alumnus Ritchie Blackmore and Blue Oyster Cult axeman Buck Dharma, while other Engl players who aren't so close to receiving their free bus pass include Steve Morse, Chris Impelliteri, Marty Friedman, Vinnie Moore and Cradle Of Filth's Paul Allender.

With such a heavyweight user list you'd expect Engl amps to be something special, and all of the products we've seen have demonstrated designer Horst Langer's talent for packing in tons of features without sacrificing tone, as well as an almost obsessively high standard of build quality. This month we're looking at the Mark II version of an amp that really impressed us when we looked at it the first time around: the Powerball head.

Built to typically high standards, the Powerball is a full-sized head that will look impressive on top of any 4 x 12 cabinet; although for the full effect you'd want to use one of

Engl's own enclosures. The overall aesthetic is simple and not as overtly stylised as some of the USA competition perhaps, with the trademark large chrome Engl logo dominating the front mesh panel. Less impressive are the 'parts bin' chrome corner protectors and small push-button switches on the front control panel, which look a little fragile. Four red LEDs behind the output valves do nothing else than provide a ruby glow to the Powerball's interior, something you'll either think is cool or naff. Still, if that's really all we can find to grumble about...

The tough ply sleeve surrounds a steel chassis that's crammed with electronics, most of it mounted on a large and very high quality printed circuit board. We've got no misgivings here at all: the Powerball's 'board layout and construction is on a par with the best in the world and should easily handle endless professional use.

The Mk I Powerball was essentially a two-channel design – each channel has two voices with a degree of independent EQ. On the Mark II there are now four separate gain controls, so it effectively provides four channels without the control overload many four-

channel designs are encumbered with. The top row of knobs take care of the Powerball's clean and crunch sounds, with separate controls for gain, volume and treble, plus shared bass and mid-range, while the lower row govern the Engl's two lead sounds. These used to be called 'open' and 'focused' on the Mark I amp, but are simply called Leads 3 and 4 on the new version. Again



Controls remain intuitive, despite the amp's versatility

### The rivals

Rivera's K-Tre 120-watt head (£2,124) has the tone a lot of metal players want right now. Awesome low-end punch and killer distortion, combined with bulletproof build quality. Mesa's 100-watt Dual Rectifier (£2,329) is the updated version of the original rock and metal head that defined that scooped thrash sound – still the gold standard for many. Orange's Rockerverb 100 head (£1,449), also in its Mk II version, has a great collection of tones and includes reverb; needs an Orange cab though

there are separate gain and volume controls with a shared EQ. There's also a mid boost function that operates on both lead channels and has its own mid-range control, with bright and bottom mini switches for the clean and crunch channels and separate bottom switches for the lead channels. The Powerball's mains department includes controls for presence and depth punch, with two switchable master volumes.

The rear panel features a comprehensive selection of speaker jacks, a pair of send/returns for the amp's parallel effects loop with a simple



The red LEDs give the Powerball's engine room a fiery glow

balance control, and a threshold control for the Powerball's built-in noise-gate, which operates on the lead channels. There's also a series of connectors for Engl's footswitches: you can use up to three of the two-button Z4 pedals or the Custom Z-9, which runs using Engl's proprietary SAC (Serial Amp Control) protocol and offers toys such as assignable buttons. Overall, the Powerball's vibe is that of a serious professional tool designed to operate on big stages and deliver huge volume.

### Sounds

The Engl doesn't need those red LEDs behind the valves to deliver red-hot tone: it's instantly apparent this new Powerball is deadly serious in the sound department.

The clean channel benefits from the 6L6 choice, with sweet Fender-inspired highs, fat lows and a warm mid-range that manages to add punch without being intrusive. The gain control for this channel has been carefully engineered to stay pristine and spark up to around halfway, beyond which you can add a little extra grit and definition that's great for blues or power ballad chording. Flip into crunch mode and the gain levels get a considerable boost, which you can make more or less aggressive using the dedicated treble control. This versatile mode is one of the

amp's best assets, it's just as easy to generate classic ZZ Top and AC/DC as it is to do more modern stuff.

The two lead channels are superb, Lead 3 provides wide dynamic range while Lead 4 is a little more compressed, perfect for singing ballad solo stuff. Both Lead channels have a powerful mid-range that's been carefully sculpted to leave just the right amount of bite and edge, while the cool thing about the boosted mid function is that it operates on a different frequency centre to the regular mid-range control, making it easy to precisely tailor this all-important part of the guitar's tone. The Powerball's lead gain and distortion range is truly epic, making it easy for the single-coils of our regular test Strat to deliver some monstrously fat lead tones with harmonic squeals exploding off the strings on demand.

The downside of using single-coil pickups in front of so much gain is the amount of hum they can feed into the input jack, making the Powerball's built-in noise-gate more of a necessity than a luxury. It's simple to use and works fine, although we'd be happier if the gate closed a little more gradually.

Overall, this new Powerball is highly impressive: an amp that's packed with features yet quick and simple to dial in – it doesn't take very long at all to get some cracking sounds, with

tone controls that work smoothly and predictably.

### Verdict

If you're into rock or metal then the Powerball offers serious clout at a price we think is very competitive. It may not have all the bells and whistles that some of the competition offers, but it's got more than enough features to handle most needs while remaining fairly intuitive and easy to operate.

The Powerball's sounds are definitely up in the big league and will easily give many amps in the £2-3k bracket a serious run for their money, so we think that the new and improved Mark II version is very good value, even if you have to buy a foot controller separately. And now with new distribution in the UK, it's highly likely we'll be seeing – and hearing – a lot more from Engl in the near future. **A**

### The Bottom Line

**We like:** World-class tones, excellent build quality, easy to use and all at a very competitive price

**We dislike:** Styling might seem dated compared with the main competition

**Guitarist says:** A great head from Engl that's well-priced and guaranteed to excite



### Engl Powerball Mk II head

**PRICE:** £1,599 (head only)

**ORIGIN:** Germany

**TYPE:** All-valve four-voice head with solid-state rectification

**OUTPUT:** 100 watts RMS

**VALVES:** 5 x ECC83/12AX7 preamp, 4 x 6L6 power amp

**DIMENSIONS:** 270 (h) x 710 (w) x 270mm (d)

**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 20/44

**CABINET:** 18mm ply

**CHANNELS:** Four

**CONTROLS:** Clean/crunch channel: gain/volume x 2, bass, mid, clean treble, crunch treble, bottom/bright switches. Lead 3 & 4 channels: gain/volume x 2, bass, mid, boosted mid, treble. Bottom switch x 2. Master presence, depth punch, master volume x 2

**FOOTSWITCH:** You can use up to three two-button Z-4 footswitches (£89 each) to control various functions, or control everything with a Z-9 foot controller (£210)

**ADDITIONAL FEATURES:** Mid-range boost on lead channels, parallel effects loop with mix control, noise-gate, valve monitoring/protection system

**OPTIONS:** None

**RANGE OPTIONS:** The recommended cabinets are the E412VSB Pro Slanted Cab (£1,020) or the E412SSB Standard Slanted Cab (£691)

**Music Force Distribution**  
01780 781630

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### Test results

**Build quality** ★★★★★  
**Features** ★★★★★  
**Sound** ★★★★★  
**Value for money** ★★★★★

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★