



Squier 'Stop
Dreaming, Start
Playing' Pack

Encore SpongeBob
SquarePants Pack

Group Test

Starter Packs to Get You Going

They don't include leather trousers, sunglasses or a bottle of JD – but these guitar starter packs have everything else you need to get out there and gig: guitar, amp, tuner and accessories

WORDS **HENRY YATES**

128 | **Guitar**



Ibanez GRX70DX
Jumpstart

Yamaha Pacifica
012 Starter Pack


Before you set off down the perilous road to rock stardom, make sure you're packed for the journey. Of course, you'll need a musical vision, an iron will, a high tolerance to liquor and a relaxed attitude to personal hygiene. But for your more tangible requirements – guitar, amp, strap, pick, lead, tuner – there's the starter pack. The concept of a catch-all bundle might not seem too rock 'n' roll: it doesn't exactly match the outlaw cool of stealing your first Les Paul. But screw that, 'cos there's nothing more rock than getting home, plugging in, priming your chops, forming a band and getting your first gig.

With Christmas coming, the goose getting fat, and your dad flicking haplessly through the Argos catalogue in search of inspiration, we've lined up four big-name packs that any aspiring rock god would want under their tree. First, there's the Yamaha pack

(£239), pairing the popular Pacifica 012 model with an amp we've frankly never heard of. Then there's the Ibanez Jumpstart pack (£225), including the GRX70DX electric and GTA-10 combo, followed by Squier's 'Stop Dreaming, Start Playing' set (£319) with its Affinity Strat and Fender G-DEC Junior amp. Finally, we've thrown a bone to cartoon fans with the Encore SpongeBob SquarePants pack (£159), which includes a traditional doublecut electric, 10-watt amp and trimmings a-go-go. Well, he is Liam Gallagher's favourite cartoon character...

Bag one of these and you're sure of a hairy Christmas and a rockin' new year. ■

**"BIG-NAME STARTER
PACKS TO GO UNDER
YOUR XMAS TREE"**

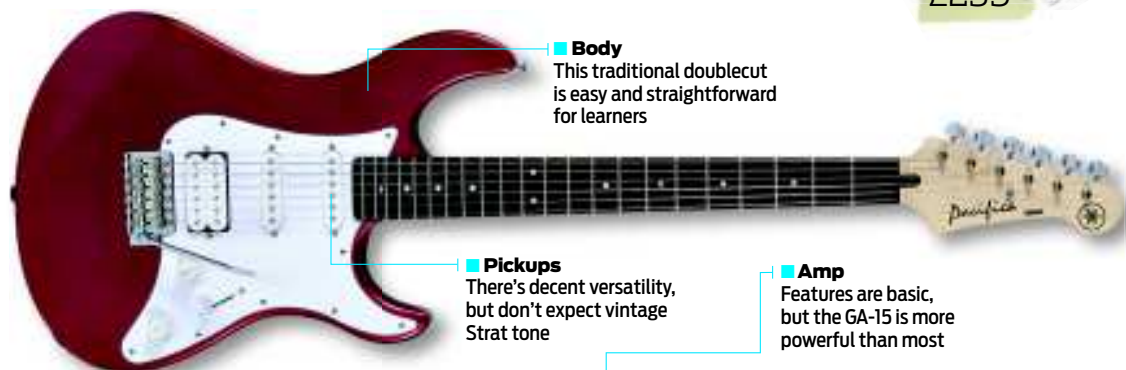

Flip the page to
find out which one
won our Group Test
head-to-head



Yamaha Pacifica 012 Starter Pack

Can the entry-level king reclaim its throne?

£239



Body

This traditional doublecut is easy and straightforward for learners

Pickups

There's decent versatility, but don't expect vintage Strat tone

Amp

Features are basic, but the GA-15 is more powerful than most

Since 1993, the Pacifica has been the archetypal first guitar, used for countless clunky renditions of *Smells Like Teen Spirit*, and offered here in its cheapest-yet 012 form. Yamaha amps aren't as revered, but the GA-15 compensates for lack of pedigree with 15 watts and twin channels, suggesting it might stretch to proper jams if you haven't got Grohl on drums.

The 012 is exceptional – for the price. The flat neck and versatile pickup layout means it

copers with all styles, it's plenty good enough to learn on, and combining the middle single and bridge 'bucker unlocks a sweet Strat-like quack that breaks into Hendrix-style fuzz when you pump the gain. Point the pickup

selector elsewhere, though, and the tone is a little flat, and with the amp's features on the minimalist side, there's no way to tart it up. As a result, while it's possible to play pretty loud (and flip easily between the clean/filth channels), you'll need to plug away at the instructional DVD for a few weeks before you get this partnership sounding good.

Conclusion: There's no doubting the value of this pack, but compared to the souped-up Pacifica V, the 012 feels like a

stopgap. That's fair enough; nobody said this was a guitar for life. You buy this pack, pay your dues, find out what styles you're into – then throw a few hundred quid at a mid-price electric and 100-watt amp that cater for them. Until then, this is a watertight introduction to the untold pleasures of axedom.

SUMMARY

For: Good value and performance

Against: You might outgrow it fast

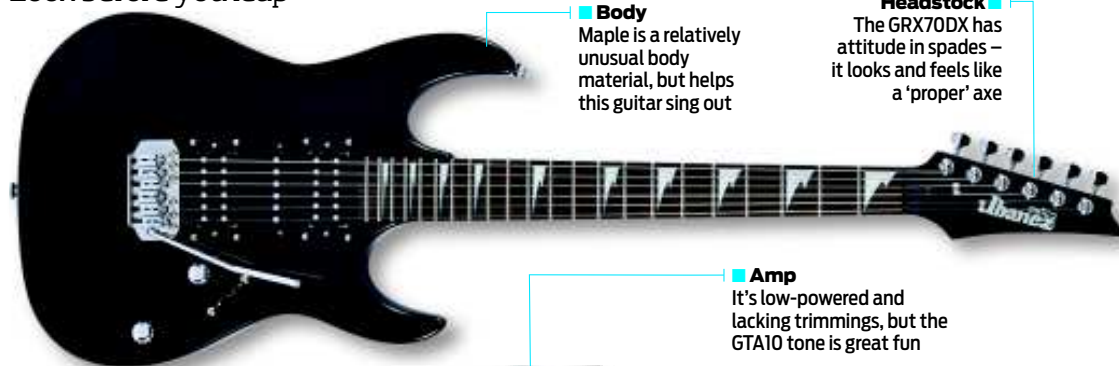
★★★★☆

TG says: More fun than a motorbike

Ibanez GRX70DX Jumpstart

Look before you leap

£225



Body

Maple is a relatively unusual body material, but helps this guitar sing out

Headstock

The GRX70DX has attitude in spades – it looks and feels like a 'proper' axe

Amp

It's low-powered and lacking trimmings, but the GTA10 tone is great fun

Maybe it's a bad omen that you can't buy the GRX70DX as a standalone guitar. But before you conclude this 'pack-only' axe must be rougher than week-old driftwood, consider Ibanez's reputation for pound-stretching, its underrated way with an amp, and its promise this pack will get us "out of the audience and on the stage".

With an Ibanez headstock logo and razorblade inlays, the GRX70DX is the looker of the bunch. Peripheral features like

tuners and control dials are flimsy, but the foundations feel more substantial and less obviously aimed at beginners, offering a chunky maple body and a poplar neck with palm-filling dimensions. You'll never

play Wembley with 10 watts, but the GTA10 has decent sonic character, with the chronic lack of features not standing in the way of a ringing clean tone and a woolly 70s crunch. Strangely, for Ibanez, the amp doesn't really 'do' a cut-glass shred tone, but the guitar's speedy feel still implies this is the one for would-be Satrianis.

Conclusion: While you'd hesitate to call them an 'investment', you won't be itching to offload the GRX70DX or GTA10, and that's a

success when you've only shelled out £225. This is a starter pack par excellence: the guitar and amp are highly playable, don't commit you to any style – and are cool-looking enough to make you want to pick 'em up. It might not be the gear of your dreams, but it'll keep your fingers warm while you're saving for that JEM.

SUMMARY

For: Looks, solid feel, nice amp tone

Against: Low wattage, trimmings

★★★★☆

TG says: Jump to it!

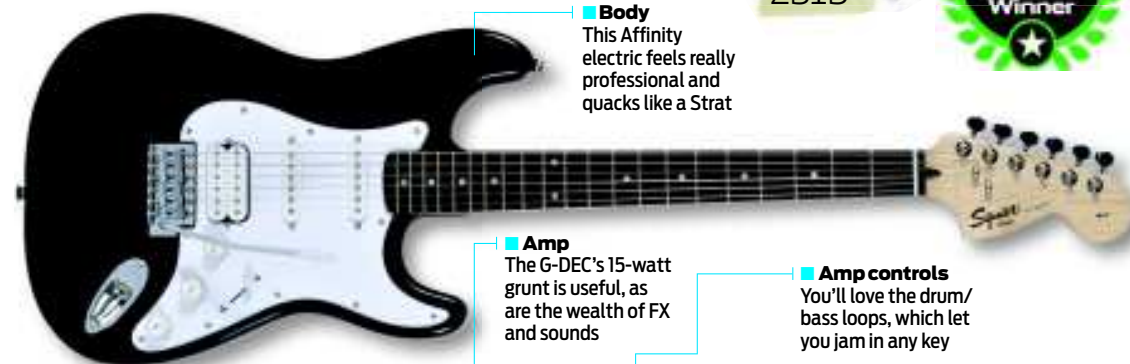
"THE SQUIER PACK LEAVES US BUZZING: CRACKING GUITAR AND ULTRA-TWEAKABLE AMP"

STARTER PACKS TO GET YOU GOING **★ GROUP TEST**

Squier 'Stop Dreaming' Pack

To Affinity - and beyond!

£319



Body
This Affinity electric feels really professional and quacks like a Strat

Amp
The G-DEC's 15-watt grunt is useful, as are the wealth of FX and sounds

Amp controls
You'll love the drum/bass loops, which let you jam in any key

At a glance

Squier 'Stop Dreaming, Start Playing' Pack

BODY: Solid agathis
NECK: Maple, bolt-on
PICKUPS: 2x singlecoil, 1x humbucker
SCALE: 25½"
AMP: G-DEC Junior (with amp models, FX, drum/bass loops)
ACCESSORIES: Strap, gigbag, lead, pick, sampler
FINISH: Black [pictured], Red, Blue
LEFT-HANDERS: No
CONTACT: Fender GBI 01342 331700
WEB: www.fender.co.uk

Squier's 1982 launch sparked the entry-level revolution, and the original budget range still leads the pack with the 'Stop Dreaming, Start Playing' bundle. Sure, it's more expensive. But the combination of an Affinity Strat HSS and a feature-rich Fender G-DEC Junior makes it clear this pack isn't just about scraping by with poverty-spec gear, it's about twiddling knobs and having fun.

We don't know what's better: the Affinity axe, which just feels so solid, playable and



professional, and genuinely sounds like a Strat; or the G-DEC Junior, which not only has 15 effects (from spring reverb to flange) and 16 brilliant amp sound presets (from a British sparkle to a fat Fender Bassman

thud), but even primes your technique for your first band by letting you solo along to a choice of 15 rhythm loops. In any key! With optional basslines! At 15-watt volume! The only conceivable criticism here is that the Affinity is incredibly twangy – even with the humbucker selected – but that's a mere drop of criticism in an ocean of love.

Conclusion: The Squier pack leaves us buzzing. If you haven't got the chops yet, you'll still get a good sound out of that cracking

guitar and ultra-tweakable amp. And with the loops proving so addictive, it won't be long before you're a pretty tasty player. Sure, some will say £319 is too much to spend on a guitar/amp you'll outgrow. We'd counter that you'll hang onto both for a very long time, if only to practise jamming in key. The clear winner.

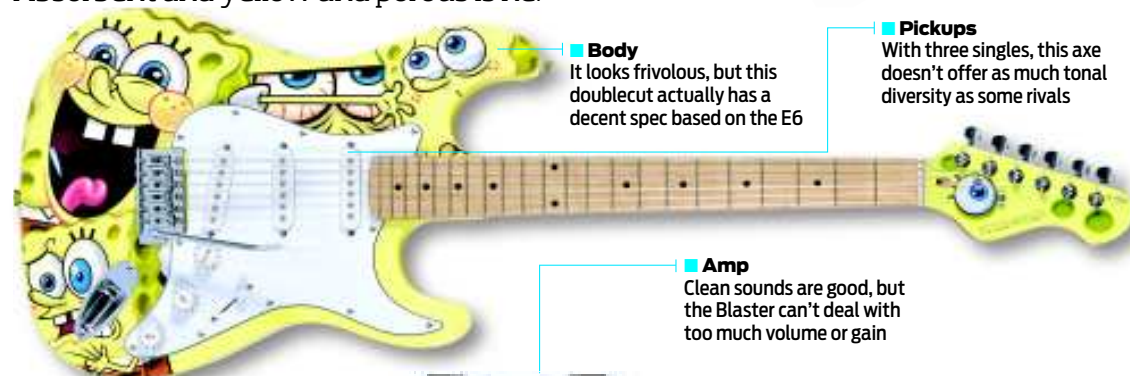
SUMMARY

For: Brilliant guitar. Brilliant amp
Against: £319 is not to be sniffed at
★★★★★

TG says: Squier takes us higher

Encore SpongeBob Pack £159

Absorbent and yellow and porous is he!



Body
It looks frivolous, but this doublecut actually has a decent spec based on the E6

Pickups
With three singles, this axe doesn't offer as much tonal diversity as some rivals

Amp
Clean sounds are good, but the Blaster can't deal with too much volume or gain

At a glance

Encore SpongeBob SquarePants Pack

BODY: Wutong
NECK: Maple, bolt-on
PICKUPS: 3x singlecoil pickups
SCALE: 25½"
AMP: BB Blaster 10-watt combo
ACCESSORIES: Strap, lead, pick, strings, gigbag, DVD
FINISH: SpongeBob graphics [pictured]
LEFT-HANDERS: No
CONTACT: John Hornby Skewes 01132 865381
WEB: www.jhs.co.uk

Pre-schoolers, stoned students and super-fan Liam Gallagher might be the obvious demographic for this new pack, but dig beneath the goofy graphics and you'll find a grown-up doublecut based on the E6, and a BB Blaster with two channels. Respect to Encore for pricing it at a pocket-money £159, but would you seriously choose this over the Squier?

Encore has always been a safe pair of hands with an entry-level guitar, and this doublecut is one



of the better Strat-o-likes out there, albeit with cheap timbers, a neck that might be too chunky for young players and less pickup versatility than some of the 'mix-and-match' contenders. Run it through the amp and you'll get

a decent clean voice, twist the gain for a useful fat-bottomed 70s roar, but go too loud or filthy and the 10-watt Blaster starts coughing and spluttering like Slash after a heavy night on the Marlboros. Nice axe, and we suspect that running it through a better amp would make it sing, but that'd be breaking the starter pack rules, innit?

Conclusion: Decent guitar. Mediocre amp. This pack is impressive out of context, but suffers from being tested right

after the Squier pack with its world-beating G-DEC amp. Thanks to the cartoon graphics, this isn't a long-term option for anyone planning to 'make a go of it' on the adult club circuit, but it'll doubtless catch the eye of younger rockers and give them a passion for life. And it's very hard to knock that for £159.

SUMMARY

For: Exceptional value, strong guitar
Against: Amp for the bedroom only
★★★★★

TG says: For children of all ages