This USB button helps Jeopardy! contestants get their buzz on

The press of a single button can mean the difference between winning thousands of dollars on national television — or winning nothing at all. *Jeopardy!'s* buzzer is arguably the most infamous game show button; over the past 59 years, the "signaling device" has become a behind-the-scenes character of its own. The button on a stick inspires future contestants to train their hand-eye coordination, reaction time, and handling, all in an attempt to gain mere milliseconds over the competition.

How do you practice such a specific skill set? *Jeopardy!*'s producers don't hand out buzzers. Many players have used clicky pens or Pez dispensers to simulate the signaling device, but you can't measure milliseconds of improvement that way.

What you need is a gadget — and according to six former *Jeopardy!* contestants who spoke to *The Verge*, the next best thing is a two-ounce aluminum-bodied light-up USB button from a company you've probably never heard of.

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The Delcom Products "USB HID Hand Held Programmable Button Switch" is a four-inch-long round metal stick with a glowing red LED-equipped plastic button on top and a two-meter USB

cable on the end. The $63 gadget feels good in the hand — there are two subtle strips of diamond knurling toward the top where you can grip the rugged rod between thumb and finger for a great tactile feel.

The button has a slight indent to hug your thumb while you press it smoothly down into the casing. There's no click but some springiness; you have to actively use your thumb to hold it down. From first grip, I was convinced I was holding a *Jeopardy!* simulation device.

The most commonly recommended way to train for *Jeopardy!*'s button is The Buzzer App. The website mimics the way *Jeopardy!* questions are delivered — you hear an audio clip of the question, then a signal light tests your reaction time. (You can try it right now with your keyboard's spacebar.). Buzz in too early, though, and you'll be "locked out" for a quarter-second, destroying your score. That lockout period happens in actual *Jeopardy!*, and it's the tricky bit: you need to hit that small window of time between the question and your competitor's reaction.

After an afternoon practice session, my fastest score was 103 milliseconds, though I'm not sure whether I actually got faster or just managed to time the rhythm.

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"I am, as far as I know, the accidental Johnny Appleseed of the Delcom buzzer in the *Jeopardy!* community," Fritz Holznagel tells me.

A 13-time contestant, Holznagel literally wrote the book on *Jeopardy!*'s buzzer, self-publishing his manifesto *Secrets of the Buzzer* in 2015. Since, it has become almost required

reading for *Jeopardy!* trainees after the community started recommending it to their peers. The Buzzer App is also Holznagel's creation, and he says that for a few years, he and his friend Chris Templeman sold their own hand-built replicas of the buzzer to help people practice. But it was a hassle to produce and ship, and one fellow contestant had a better idea.

"It really is (just by coincidence, I think) close to the *Jeopardy!* look and feel."

In 2017, Holznagel says, he met an A.C. Thomas at the Trivia Championships of North America who was also trying to build their own buzzer at home but discovered Delcom's product instead. He sent the link to Holznagel: "It really is (just by coincidence, I think) close to the *Jeopardy!* look and feel." Holznagel has been recommending Delcom's buzzer to readers of his book ever since.

Even though Delcom's button is very similar to the *Jeopardy!* signaling device, it's apparently a coincidence. "It definitely wasn't made for *Jeopardy!*," a Delcom sales representative told me over the phone. Delcom Products makes a variety of switches, controllers, modules, and chipsets that are used in fields like medical, aviation, and the military, and this specific switch is intended for "process equipment, automated processes, medical equipment, gaming, special needs."

Even though many *Jeopardy!* trainees have reached out to buy the button, the first orders were from a Norwegian defense contractor, Kongsberg Defense and Aerospace, so it could offer a simple push-to-talk interface for air traffic control. This button also made it to Hollywood — Liam Neeson can be seen using the Delcom to blow up a safe in the 2020 movie *Honest Thief.*

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underline-gray [&>a]:shadow-underline-gray-63 dark:[&>a]:text-gray-bd dark:[&>a]:shadow-underline-gray”>Video by Briarcliff Entertainment

Since the Delcom button is not exactly the same as the *Jeopardy!* signaling device, it’s not a surefire solution for buzzer champions. Former contestants tell *The Verge* that the signaling device is much lighter than the Delcom’s solid aluminum body and that the Delcom button felt a little springier and / or more tactile. Though the Delcom button design is similar, contestants say the *Jeopardy!* signaling device was wider and the button slightly larger.

Lynn Yu, a former contestant whose blog has sometimes been cited as an introduction to the Delcom button, told me Delcom’s product actually didn’t help her buzzer skills in the long run, and the size difference mattered. “I ended up having to change to a two-handed grip,” Yu said. “It was heavier; it didn’t push down as easily as the Delcom buzzer did. I definitely struggled with the buzzer on the show.”

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But others believe the button helped. Kyle Daly says he spent a little over a month practicing with the buzzer before his taping of *Jeopardy!* and managed to bring his reaction time down from an average of just under 200 milliseconds to around 70-80 milliseconds. Zach Gozlan says that even though he didn’t win his game, he knows for a fact that the buzzer practice helped him stay in the game against another player who, in his mind, had a knowledge edge over him. *Jeopardy!* releases box scores of each game, so Gozlan was able to see the number of times each contestant buzzed in, among other stats. “All I really know is I was faster than the two folks I played that day,” he says.

Cindy Zhang says the Delcom buzzer helped her ring in first about 68 percent of the time on her first *Jeopardy!* appearance but about 48 percent during her Second Chance appearance once all the contestants had gotten used to *Jeopardy!*'s buzzer. Overall, the consensus seems to be that Delcom's varying results are at least far better than just clicking a pen to practice.

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Whether or not it can help a future contestant become a *Jeopardy!* champion, the Delcom buzzer is now frequently recommended on *Jeopardy!* blogs, contestant guides, and TikTok videos for anyone wanting to get onto the show.

Like Fritz Holznagel's manifesto, the Delcom buzzer gained traction through a growing online community of former and prospective contestants who want to help each other win big. The legend of the button will live on in this handheld USB shortcut key — until someone builds a system even closer to the one on the show.

https://www.theverge.com/23852814/jeopardy-signaling-device-delcom-practice-buzzer-button-of-the-month