

The Magic Tech Road

All Linking Rings Are Not Made Equal

By David Reed-Brown

I have often seen magicians using any old linking rings without paying attention to their many qualities. I learned a great deal about linking rings while researching a purchase last year, so here are some “key” factors to ponder as you make your decision: feel, keys, weight, diameter, thickness, steel or aluminum, sound and shine.

A WARNING REGARDING FEEL: Whatever you do, try out the rings first. They should feel “right” in your hands. Make sure they are really what you want because you will probably have them for life. At least make sure you get a money-back guarantee if you are going to invest \$250-800 in a set of linking rings.

FIRST, ask yourself these questions: Where am I going to perform my linking ring routines? What kind of routines will I be using? Where in my act will I use them. Will the routine be silent or talking, serious or comedic?

KEY RINGS: “To lock or not to lock?” That is the question. Do you want to do crashing links or some of the spectacular silent links and unlinks like the late and dearly respected Richard Ross? If so, then a standard key ring would probably be best. However, Ross is known for using a locking key in some of his most influential routines. While a locking key ring allows you to display all solid rings and even hand them out briefly for inspection, they seem to work better with a fewer number of rings and in a slower or more close-up routine – perhaps with only 3 or 4 rings. Some locking keys are magnetic while are offset with a hook or zigzag cut in the ring. The latter require different amounts of pressure that vary with the make and size of the ring. For example, the Klamm locking 12” key is easier to open than the 10” because there is less torque on the joint.

With a larger number of rings in a larger stand-up setting, it is much easier to hide a standard key gap with good sleight of hand. One professional I know of uses a huge gap, but no one ever sees or suspects it because that person’s technique and presentation are so good.

WEIGHT: The total weight of the rings in your hands may be more of an issue than you realize. It depends on how much you practice and perform with them in a given day. Even where they are in your program can matter, depending on what physical exertion you have been doing in the

show thus far. After a 2 hour practice session with my 12" Klamm rings, my arms began to tire, and I regularly play an hour of racquetball.

DIAMETER: Keep in mind the total length of longest chain you make in your routine. Do you really want to use 15" rings if you are making a 7 ring chain? Jeff McBride recommends going with 12" rings for visibility from stage. Eight inch rings are generally too small for adult male hands, unless you are doing a comedy routine. The smaller size might be funny in the right routine - so might a jumbo set, for that matter. Generally though, for cabaret work, I would not go less than 10" and if you are on stage, 12" is preferable.

THICKNESS: Thicker rings are easier to handle. However, in my humble opinion, thinner rings can give a better illusion of a very slow unlinking. With the right lighting, though, thicker rings can be slowly unlinked (in the standard side-by-side figure eight pattern) a few feet in front of the audience. By the way, if you change ring thickness, make sure you rehearse well before performing with them. Thickness makes a bigger difference than you might realize.

STEEL OR ALUMINUM?: Steel. There, wasn't that easy? Hold on though, size and weight are related. Hollow metal is lighter than solid metal. Hollow metal makes the rings appear thicker and heavier, so the magic is more impressive. It also makes the rings easier to handle. Hollow aluminum is lighter, cheaper and easier to manufacturer than hollow steel, so aluminum is cheaper and more common. But... hollow steel is significantly more expensive, and these rings look very solid, shine beautifully, and sound wonderful. They handle very smoothly.

SOUND: If this is important to you (and it is to me), hollow aluminum rings don't cut the mustard. While they are easier to handle and are more visually impressive, that magical ringing sound is lost. The sound of the rings chiming together is very important to me. My major purpose for doing the routine is to add acoustic and visual variety to my show. I portray the rings classically as an ancient Chinese mystery. Well, throughout Asian culture, the ringing of bells is very important (secularly and religiously). In my routine I contrast the dramatic difference in sound between crashing links and silent links. On the other hand, if I were doing a three-ring routine and not going for the contrast in sound, I could see using aluminum.

SHINE: Cleaning the rings with Windex before the performance makes them sparkle - especially steel rings. Shinier rings seem more magical.

SUMMARY OF PRODUCTS

(NOTE: Because of market fluctuations, prices are approximate.)

BUMPER 10" - About \$50, and still not a bad option for under \$100. These are solid stainless steel. The welds should not be visible. If you can get a set that are not chrome plated, you won't need to worry about it flaking off. There are numerous makers of "Bumper style" rings. The set Hank Lee sells feels more narrow (www.magicfact.com). Denny & Lee also has a good set (www.dennymagic.com).

KLAMM - THE AFFORDABLE 12" OPTION: For 12 inch rings under \$250, from what I can tell I believe the only option is Klamm. Bob Klamm sells a 12" set of 8 rings for around \$100. They are solid stainless steel, not coated with chrome or anything. They look and sound great. The welds are somewhat visible upon close examination, but this is minor. I used a set for years with much success, and I still keep them in a case for my quick grab-the-magic-case-and-run shows. The locking key is about \$35 and is the side-notched style. The rings are a bit heavier as they are solid steel 12" rings. At first I had to work on keeping one ring completely horizontal in one hand, but I figured it out just fine. The 12" locking key is easier to operate than the 10". The locking key is around \$35. It is the only 12" set of steel rings for under \$300 that I have found. Smaller sizes and configurations are also available. Again, these are solid stainless steel rings with no chrome coating to flake off over time.
<http://www.klamm-magic.com/>

VIKING makes a set of hollow aluminum rings for around \$125. Their name shouts "quality" in my book, but I have never seen these rings.

STEVEN'S MAGIC EMPORIUM has a nice set of eight 11 inch aluminum linking rings with a locking key for around \$85. That seems like a deal, and it is only \$85. Besides, if they do not work out, you can always sell them on e-bay or pass them on to a promising young protégé. You can buy a three-ring set for \$55. <http://www.stevensmagic.com/>

ABBOTT'S hollow aluminum Featherweight linking rings were quite popular among professionals years ago. Eugene Burger speaks highly of them. However, they are manufactured differently today than they were then. The price is moderate for a professional set: \$235 for a complete set of 10" and \$350 for 12", no locking keys available. (NOTE: See Chris Capstone's rings for comparably priced 12" hollow steel set.)

TANNEN "Super Locking Rings" Hollow Aluminum, \$130 for three rings, \$240 for 8 rings. These are 11" in diameter and are hard anodized for shine and durability. They come with a very good locking key which is apparently seamless from just a few feet away.
<http://www.tannenmagic.com/>

OWEN Eternal Orbs Professional Lightweight Rings – A year ago, these seemed to be best linking rings in the world for my work. They are seamless, hollow and stainless steel. They shine beautifully. They are thick, very light and easy to hold. They ring like bells, and, frankly, every time I perform with them it feels like Christmas! They run \$350-450 depending on size. The 12” locking key alone is \$250; the 10” is \$200. They come in 8” (solid steel) and 10”, 12” and 15” hollow steel. Various combinations of rings may be purchased. <http://www.owenmagic.com>
Denny & Lee also stocks them www.dennymagic.com

ULTRA PRO LINKING RINGS BY CHRIS CAPSTONE. This set of hollow stainless steel rings is lovingly made by professional magician Chris Capstone. They are polished to a very high luster. I have not handled these, but Marc DeSouza owns a very large collection of linking rings, and he e-mailed me about the Ultra Pros, “I once drove hours to Owen Magic to purchase a set of their rings, but I held back not wanting to put down the money. Then I was so impressed with Chris Capstone’s Ultra Pro Linking Rings, that I purchased two sets.” That is quite an endorsement. Chris wants me to add that he makes the rings on a very limited basis because he is primarily a performer. Making them is a joyous labor of love. It is possible you may need to wait a bit because of supply and demand. A set of 12” rings is \$360 post paid and insured. The 10” set is \$320 post paid and insured. He does not make a locking key. <http://www.capstone-magic.com>

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In the fall of 2000, I took the plunge and went with a standard set of 12" Owen Eternal Orbs. In short: I'M THRILLED. However, had I known about the Ultra Pros, I would have given them careful consideration. Denny Haney at Denny & Lee in Baltimore believes the only professional stage option is Owen. Otherwise, he advises sticking with an inexpensive 10" set and saving your nickel plating until you can get the Owens. I believe the Klamm rings are worth \$100 to learn, use on stage and then keep as a backup. Remember, though, that how and where you intend to use the rings matters. Carefully consider your purpose. Then weigh their diameter, number, metal, thickness, weight, sound, shine and price to determine the best choice for your next set of Chinese linking rings.