FIRST LOOK

Gentlemen, Start Your Scanners!
First Look at the Uniden SC230

By Jim Clarke, NR2G

How would you race car fans like a scanner specifically designed for you? Well, that's exactly what Uniden has done with the new SC230. Yet, even if you don't scan car races, this receiver provides features not contained in the typical scanner. Although it looks very much like the new BC246T, the SC230 has the NASCAR logo on the front panel, and has keys that show it was designed specifically for the race-scanning enthusiast. It covers the same frequency bands, but does not provide trunk tracking.

❖ Ergonomics

The 230's compact design makes it easy to carry. The concentric volume and squelch knobs are different heights – the volume being taller – making it easy to increase the volume without accidentally changing the squelch setting. An "orangish" backlight makes viewing the display a non-issue in low light situations.

There is a programming port on the side, a jack for external power for operation and for charging. The 230 has a built-in charge circuit that allows it to operate while charging the batteries. A small switch, conveniently located in the battery compartment, selects rechargeable or non-rechargeable batteries. When you install your batteries, make sure you select the correct type to avoid possible damage to the scanner.

The Function and Menu buttons are operated with the thumb, if held in your left hand, leaving the other hand for operating the front panel keys or scroll knob.

❖ No More Wasted Memory

Using Uniden's new dynamically-allocated memory system to store race, car, driver, and frequency information doesn't waste an ounce of memory. Not only does it efficiently use memory, but alphanumeric labeling provides for logically naming the race, car, and driver; see Table 1 for a simple example. This way, the user can quickly see what he is listening to, without using a look-up table that correlates channel to content. And, with 1600 to 2000 channels available, depending on how it's configured, it would be difficult to max out this scanner's memory.

For those of you looking to scan services such as police, fire, amateur, etc., this scanner will work great for you, too. I have always been frustrated when setting up a typical scanner with fixed frequency banks, because organizing frequencies to monitor various services would inevitably waste memory channels.

With the SC230, I can arrange things exactly the way I want them. I can create a system, create as many groups as I think logically belong in that system, and then add the frequencies to the appropriate group. The system, group, and even the frequency can all be tagged with a custom alphanumeric label; see Table 2 for a simple example. Now when I am scanning police frequencies, for example, and it stops on an active channel, it displays the label I entered for that frequency. If I don't want to enter a label, I can leave the default the scanner uses when making my frequency entries.

★★★★☆

4 out of 5 stars

This new memory management system may be better understood if equated to a computer's file system. To scan a racing system, the race equates to the disk drive on the computer; a car in the race equates to a folder in that drive; and the driver for that car equates to a sub-folder within that folder; within that sub-folder, instead of files, you have frequencies for that driver.

Scanning a conventional system is similar, just using slightly different terminology: Using the drive/folder/file analogy, the conventional system's architecture is system/group/frequencies, respectively.

❖ A Little Different

Those of you who have been around scanners for a while will find the 230 also works a little differently when it comes to finding and entering frequencies. If you're like me, you're accustomed to having a variable frequency oscillator (VFO) for tuning around, and then saving the active frequency to a channel, if desired.

The best way I can describe this radio is like a crystal scanner in which you program the crystal's frequencies at will, with at least 1600 sockets available. I know it sounds like a step backward, but that's the analogy that came to my mind after learning how to use this scanner. There is no VFO; you work with what I would call a "scratch pad" that uses any available memory.

If you want to tune to a frequency, you enter it and quick save it to the "Quick Save" system/"Quick Save" group. As you add frequencies, the group gets larger. However, unlike a VFO, if you want to go back to one of those previously tuned frequencies, just select it from the group. When you're done checking new frequencies, you can delete discrete frequencies from the group, delete the group, or delete the entire "Quick Save" system.

❖ Other Settings

The 230 allows the user to configure a channel's CTCSS or DCS, modulation type, frequency step, 18dB attenuator, delay time, priority, alert, and lockout. To help the user be more efficient while at the track or in the shack, races, systems, cars, and groups can be assigned a "quick key" to provide single-key press selection. When a quick key is pressed, the corresponding item is enabled (or disabled)

in the scanning sequence.

❖ Built-In Tools

Have you ever wondered what was transmitting nearby? With the Close Call feature, the scanner will detect strong transmissions near the receive antenna. It can perform dedicated Close Call detection, or, during normal scanning, Close Call can check for activity in the background in the selected bands. Notification of a detected signal is customizable, and if desired, the detected signal's frequency can automatically be stored to a predefined system's group. I did some simple testing using a Family Radio Service (FRS) handie-talkie at a range of about 30 feet, and the scanner found the signal and stored its frequency without a hitch. When you are finished, you can go back and review the frequency list of hits that it found.

A search function is also available. The 230 comes preprogrammed with ten service ranges, or the user can create custom ranges and can lock out any that are undesired. Searching starts at the beginning of the non-locked-out ranges and sweeps through each range using the specified step size. Searching is reasonably fast, with the current frequency being scanned indicated on the display.

While in Close Call or search mode, the scanner is capable of searching for and displaying a sub-audible tone on a detected signal. As if this weren't enough, it can also be configured to screen out paging systems and skip data transmissions. Step size, modulation type, attenuation, and delay time are all settings available for customization.

❖ WX Alert Feature

The 230 even comes with a full-blown weather alert monitor. You can configure up to five SAME (Specific Area Message Encoding) groups, each with eight FIPS (Federal Information Processing System) codes. Three different alert modes are available: alert only, all FIPS, and specified SAME group. In alert only mode, you will be alerted whenever the 1050 Hz warning tone is transmitted. In all FIPS mode, you are alerted when any FIPS is transmitted with the alert information displayed on the scanner's display. In specified SAME group mode, you are only alerted when an FIPS code has been sent that is in the SAME group you have programmed and selected.

There is also a weather alert priority feature. It checks the weather channel every five seconds for the 1050 Hz alert tone, and if received, alerts the user and holds on the channel, allowing the user to listen to the warning message.

❖ Software for Scanner Management

Although the SC230 has those great memory management features, entering large or multiple systems would be quite tedious using the controls. Here's where the SC230 Uniden Advanced Scanner Director enters in. This software, sold separately by Uniden, allows the user to completely configure races or systems, and upload them into the scanner. Cloning will also be supported using the Director. Cloning copies the complete contents of one SC230 to as many other SC230s as you like. Cloning can be accomplished one radio at a time, using a cable, or over the air to multiple radios at the same time.

❖ What Comes With It?

Uniden supplies, in addition to the SC230 scanner, an owner's manual, wrist strap, wall adapter/charger, two AA NiMH rechargeable cells, six-inch rubber duck antenna, two-inch stubby antenna, plastic belt clip, computer-to-scanner cable with DB9 connector, and frequency guide. And to get the new owners started faster, the 230 comes already preprogrammed for many NASCAR races. Not only is it ready to monitor races out of the box, but those preprogrammed races can act as a "template" to help users plan their own races in the future.

❖ Final Thoughts and Overall Ratings

My biggest beef with the SC230 was the manual. Its lack of continuity, in my opinion, left me jumping back and forth just trying to figure out how to tune a frequency. It was challenging to switch over from my old "VFO thinking" to the new Quick Save, system, and group thinking. I like pictures, and it seems even a small example would have gone a long way toward making it easier.

Another thing I feel would make a marked improvement is somehow using the keyboard to select alphanumeric characters when entering labels, instead of having to spin a knob. When I entered a small system for testing purposes, I found myself getting frustrated rather quickly. While making minor modifications to existing systems is fairly easy, large or new races and systems would be best programmed using the Director software.

I am thrilled with the memory management system and think it's been a long time coming. With this new way of organizing channels, I recommend taking Uniden's advice before sitting down to program this scanner: Make copies of the manual's planning sheet and take a few minutes to lay things out before spending the time to enter all of the race or system information.

Bottom line, whether it's monitoring a race, or a conventional system, you'll find this scanner to be a worthy tool in your communications toolbox.

The MSRP for the SC230 is $279.

Table 1

Example of a Race System
(Frequencies may not be accurate)

Race	Car	Driver	Frequency
Nextel Cup	0	M.Bliss	466.5000
			469.1375
	2	R.Wallace	451.8250
			464.8250
Busch Gr Nat	0	K.Davis	466.2625
			467.1125
	1	C.Mears	468.3125
			460.7375
	2	R.Hornaday	461.5125
			461.5875

Table 2

Example of Conventional Systems
(Frequencies may not be accurate)

System	Group	Channel	Channel Name
Police	Liv. Co.	155.595	Dispatch
		155.620	Car to Car
	Monroe Co.	450.025	Towns East
		450.075	Towns West
		450.150	Car to Car
	Ontario Co.	155.755	Dispatch
		155.850	Car to Car
Fire	Henrietta	46.550	Dispatch
		46.650	Working E
		46.660	Working W
		150.255	Fire Police
	Bloomfield	48.125	Dispatch
	NY State	45.800	Mutual Aid

MT First Look Rating (0-10 scale)
Audio Quality..................... 9
Audio Level 8
Backlight/Display 9
Ease of Use 6
Feature Set 8
Keyboard/Button Layout 7
Overall Reception............... 8
Sensitivity........................... 8
Reception............................ 8
Battery Life......................... 9