

Twins peddling a hot product

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Mechanical engineers find a niche with their ultra-light wheels for racing bicycles



Twins Jon and Chris Thornham, originally from Dartmouth, are selling carbon-fibre wheels to racing cyclists around the world. The pair, both mechanical engineers, expect to ship 4,500 sets of wheels by the end of the year. (Courtesy FLO Cycling)

Sometimes it pays to reinvent the wheel, especially when it's for high-performance cycling.

Dartmouth natives Jon and Chris Thornham, twins in their early 30s, have set the cycle-racing industry spinning with a radical redesign of the ultra-light carbon fibre wheel favoured by top cyclists around the world.

"It's still early in the season, but we expect we'll ship at least 4,500 wheels, mostly through pre-orders, before the end of the year," Jon said Wednesday of the FLO Cycling business he and brother Chris launched in February 2012 from their base in Las Vegas.

The Thornham twins got into high-performance racing wheel designing after Chris was asked for more than \$2,000 for a set of wheels that could not stand up to their standards for construction or performance.

"I almost fell out of my chair after I looked at them and he told me what they cost," Jon said.

Although the brothers have limited experience in the field of aerodynamic design, they are mechanical engineering graduates of the University of New Brunswick.

The brothers, who are also graduates of Eric Graves Memorial Junior High and Prince Andrew High in Dartmouth, soon found themselves enthralled with the design and marketing challenges behind these critical pieces of cycling technology.

Jon said he and his brother were pulled into the world of drag force and drag coefficients, and experimented with various aerodynamic wheel designs.

They radically reduced their research and development costs by employing computer-aided testing of their aerodynamic designs before coming up with their first prototype.

They realized they had the capacity to provide an economical high-performance product to a very demanding market.

Instead of the traditional retail distribution network, which ups the price along the channel, they opted for a web-based direct sales model for hardy aerodynamic wheels that retailed for \$898 a set.

The price and performance of their design had top competitive cyclists and designers sitting up in their saddles and heading for the FLO Cycling website. High-performance carbon fibre cycle wheels often have significant retail mark-ups, with a set sometimes selling for as much as \$6,000.

“The response was far beyond what we expected,” Jon said. “Our servers crashed in our first week when we sold 750 individual wheels through pre-orders.”

This year, the brothers are scrambling as the business develops to include new products and manufacturers.

“We had both always wanted to be in business together. Suddenly, it’s just happening,” Jon said.

On the corporate integrity side, the brothers established a Bike for a Kid program, which donates a cycle to an underprivileged youngster for each set of custom-designed ceramic bearings sold through their website.

The brothers basically work together, shipping orders as new product arrives from the manufacturer.

Several thousand of their wheels can be found on high-performance cycles in 30 countries.

And the brothers know their business well.

“We’ve only sold 10 wheels in Nova Scotia,” Jon said. “Hopefully, we can do something about that.”

About the Author »

BILL POWER BUSINESS REPORTER

E-Mail: bpower@herald.ca
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