

# triathlete

FIT. FAST. FUN.

HOW  
**ROKA**  
TURNED  
A SINGLE  
WETSUIT  
INTO THE  
SPORT'S  
REIGNING  
GEAR  
EMPIRE



KURT SPENSER

**SPECIAL REPORT**

**WHY TRIATHLON IS HIRING A MARKETING FIRM**

ROB CANALES

**IS VO<sub>2</sub> MAX DEAD?**  
(WE KIND OF HOPE SO)



**27**

more funky, futuristic products and people advancing multisport

# THE CONSUMER CHAMPS

**NAMES:** Twin brothers Jon and Chris Thornham, 35, owners and founders of FLO Cycling

**LOCATION:** Las Vegas, Nev.

**BRAGGING RIGHTS:** With their company, FLO Cycling, the Thornham brothers have bridged the gap between design, engineering and consumer-direct sales, bringing high-quality technology to the masses. Both mechanical engineers, the Thornhams wanted to figure out a way to manufacture fast wheels affordably. The year was 2009 and their timing was perfect—the patent on toroidal rim shape for aero wheels that Zipp and HED co-owned was about to expire. So the “FLO bros” set out to create their own toroidal wheels out of more affordable carbon fiber, which they decided to sell in a business model that was ahead of its time. “At our first Interbike in 2010, when we were kind of thinking about the idea [of starting FLO], most people said to us, ‘You’re going consumer-direct? Don’t do that. It’s not going to work.’ And they gave us a hundred reasons why,” Chris says. “I don’t know if it’s the way that my brain works, but I can’t see it any other way.” In its first year, FLO shipped wheels to 28 countries, something the brothers are convinced would never had happened had they gone the retail route. “There are all these companies that are starting to grow and grow and grow in the direct space, and there are going to be some shifts coming soon, I would project,” Chris says.

On top of the consumer-direct model, the Thornhams created a charity. When they started the company, they also launched Bike for a Kid, which provides bikes and helmets for children in need. FLO now donates 1 percent of all wheel sales to the program, and almost 1,400 kids have received new bikes so far. “Our whole lives, we’ve been involved with volunteering and charity of some sort, and when we started a business, it was just a natural extension of who we are,” Jon says, “and we wanted it to be part of our culture as a business.” FLO remains a staff of two—the other jobs are outsourced or contracted. Yet one job they like to



do themselves is customer service—if you call their customer service line, it’ll ring straight through to either Jon or Chris.

**WHAT’S NEXT:** The Thornham brothers want to examine all the little things that make wheels faster. “Aerodynamically, not that we can’t make any improvements, but the major improvements, the major gains that you’ve seen in technology, have kind of hit a road block,” Jon says. “Even though everyone has their own design approach, we’re all sort of landing at this peak. So the question becomes, ‘How do we get something more out of a wheel?’” To find the answers to those questions, they built a custom computer and rode it on four different Ironman courses to collect wind data. They used the data to work with a computation fluid dynamics software company (essentially a wind tunnel in a computer) to build an algorithm and “solve” for the fastest wheel. They’re also studying things that happen internally with tires (pressures, casing tensions, rolling resistances). “That can lead into mountain bikes, that can lead into road bikes,” Chris says. “It can lead into a whole number of different things, and that’s kind of what we’re studying now and the direction we’re going to head.” ▲

OLIVER BAKER