

TriMadness!

Flo Cycling, Interview, Ten Questions

>Ten Questions With...Chris Thornham of Flo Cycling Designs

Posted by Tri Madness · November 22, 2010 · 4 Comments

>Aero wheels. The benefits are pretty well documented. The aerodynamic capabilities of wheels made by Zipp, Hed, Mavic and others are well documented. There's almost no other single piece of equipment that we triathletes can purchase that is as impactful as a good set of wheels.

The problem is, though, that aero wheels are not cheap. Take, for instance, the price of a pair of Zipp wheels. A typical wheel set up that lots of folks use is their 606 set – a 404 front and 808 rear. This set of wheels would set you back only \$2200 or so. Certainly, one can find used wheels at a bargain – but let's face it, sometimes you just don't know what you're getting.

Enter Flo Cycling Designs. This company, owned by brothers Chris & John Thornham, is out to change the aero wheel market. Or at least make it a little more affordable.

Flo Designs is in the process of developing, building and testing a new line of affordable aero wheels.

Recently, Tri Madness sat down with Chris Thornham to find out a little bit more about the company, the wheels, and when we can buy them.

This week's version of "Ten Questions With..." is with Chris Thornham from Flo Cycling Designs:

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TM: You and your brother Jon run Flo Cycling. What are your backgrounds, both in triathlon and professionally?

CT: Both Jon and I have Mechanical Engineering degrees from the University of New Brunswick. Since graduating we have worked as design engineers, sales engineers and been involved in entrepreneurial projects. I am a competitive age group triathlete and have been competing in triathlons for the last couple years. Jon is a recreational cyclist and runner with a passion for business and software/hardware development.

TM: Flo Cycling is developing new carbon race wheels. The competitive landscape for wheels is pretty intense, with a few “900 pound gorillas”. How will your wheels be differentiated from products already in the marketplace?

CT: When comparing ourselves to the larger wheel companies we think the biggest difference will be price. When planning our business we also discussed how we would differentiate ourselves from the other companies selling lower priced wheels. We hope to stand out in that arena for two reasons. The first reason is customer service. From day one our goal has been to offer great customer service. The second reason is the design of our wheels. Even though our wheels will be competitively priced, our fairing shapes will be similar to the best wheels available today. Many of the other lower priced wheels available use an existing carbon fiber “V-Notch” mold. The only unique feature is the logo that is placed on the finished product. It is my understanding that we are in line to be the first company offering an engineered toroidal carbon fiber wheel at an affordable price.

TM: So far, you’ve taken a really open-book approach with information you’ve shared with prospective consumers. For example, you recently shared computer modeling showing favorable drag results and asked for input on your company logo and the weave pattern for your carbon fiber. Not many companies take this open-book approach. What’s compelled you guys to go this route?

CT: We feel there are decisions to be made during the design process that are best answered by potential customers. We are two people designing wheels for thousands. Our preference on things like carbon fiber weave may not be the preference of others. We feel it is imperative to design a product for our future customers not of ourselves. Getting our potential customers input throughout the design process, gives us a better chance of producing a product people will want to buy. We have released our aero data and other information because we want our potential customers to be as excited about the design process as we are. We believe educating our customers will allow them to purchase the products that suit them best. We also want people to know we have an open door policy. Feedback, questions and concerns are always welcome. We hope our involvement to date has set the tone for what customers can expect in the future.

TM: For the non-engineers among us, what do the results from your computer models tell you about your wheels?

CT: Creating a carbon fiber mold is expensive and time consuming. It didn’t make financial sense for us to build real life examples of every shape we wanted to test. Using computational fluid dynamics software has allowed us to test a variety of shapes at a much lower cost. During our tests we ran several shapes through a simulated wind tunnel at a variety of wind speeds and yaw(wind) angles. The data collected lets us plot a Drag vs Yaw graph for each shape. This allows us to select the most aerodynamic shape in a more timely and economical fashion.

TM: Now that you have some initial modeling done, what are the next steps you’ll take in terms of product development?

CT: Our rims, hubs and spokes have been selected. Our next step is to open the carbon fiber

molds for our fairings. When the molds are completed, we will develop prototypes for testing on the road and in the wind tunnel.

TM: What offerings do you plan on having in your product suite? Will you make disks, offer PowerTap, multiple depths of fairings? Clincher & tubular?

CT: We plan on offering 60mm and 90mm front and rear wheels, along with a lenticular disc wheel. Our wheels will feature aluminum clincher rims, Sapim spokes and nipples, lightweight high quality hubs, and carbon fiber fairings. We also plan on offering upgrade options for more aerodynamic spokes and ceramic bearings. At this point, Powertaps are a consideration for the future but will not be available on launch day. Clydesdale / Sprinter wheels will also be available.

TM: Have you landed on price points yet, and if so, can you share what those will be?

CT: Our price points are still a moving target. If all goes as planned, our front 60mm and 90mm wheels will be approximately \$249-\$299. Our rear 60mm and 90mm wheels will be approximately \$299-\$349. There are still details to work out with the disc wheel, but we are shooting for a \$500-\$600 price range. These prices are not finalized and may change by the time we launch. That said, our goal is to be as close to these values as possible.

TM: What do you envision as your distribution strategy? Will you sell exclusively via the web, or are you seeking retail deals with brick & mortar shops as well?

CT: When a product goes from the manufacturer, to a distributor, to a bike shop, and then the customer, prices easily become inflated. In short, the more hands a product touches the higher the prices get. Technology has changed the way companies do business since many of our competitors opened their doors. Selling via the internet reduces the number of hands that touch our products. This is the main reason we are able to keep our prices so low. For this reason we will be selling our products exclusively through our website and will not be selling our products at brick and mortar shops.

TM: Going back to the "900 pound gorilla" line of thinking...Zipp, Hed, Reynolds, Mavic... lots of big companies in the marketplace. What sort of marketing plan do you have to break in and grab at least a toe-hold in the market?

CT: Before we discuss our marketing plan I think it is important to discuss our market. When I first got into triathlon I was shocked by the price of aero race wheels. After months of saving I pulled the trigger on a set I really couldn't afford. When they arrived I said to Jon "there has to be a cheaper way to do this". Jon and I have been putting Flo Cycling together ever since. We realized that there is an untapped population of people who want race wheels. Like ourselves, they cannot or choose not to afford them. Our goal is to make race wheels affordable for a larger percentage of the triathlon/ cycling population. We are not under the assumption that we are going to take down the 900 pound gorilla, nor do we want to. We'd rather be friends with the 900 pound gorillas. Simply put, the 900 pound gorillas make great products that serve a different customer. To grab a toe-hold in the market place, we asked ourselves what we felt was needed. The answer was well designed aerodynamic race wheels, and an active

involvement with our customers. Our store is much more than our website. It includes our social media accounts, the online forums, email etc. We believe in real time responses to questions and customer service issues. Creating quality content for our readers and search engine optimization will help drive traffic to our site. We will also use more traditional forms of marketing such a banner ads on key websites. Lastly, we will be traveling to as many races a humanly possible. We will have demos on hand for people to ride and we will be there to interact with our customers.

TM: When do you expect to launch and sell your first set of wheels?

CT: As it currently stands we are looking at a pre-order in the first quarter of 2011. Our wheels should start shipping 2nd quarter. Pre-order wheels will ship on a first come first serve basis.

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You can learn much more about Flo Cycling Designs by visiting their website [here](#) or their blog [here](#). You can also find fairly regular posts by Chris & John on Slowtwitch.com.

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Discussion

4 Responses to “>Ten Questions With...Chris Thornham of Flo Cycling Designs”

1. >Great stuff!.With 3 kids to put through college, I made the decision to not buy aero wheels for the 6 minutes I might save. Now I may rethink that strategy.Thanks!

Posted by [ONEHOURIRONMAN](#) | [November 23, 2010, 9:00 am](#)

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- >\$500-\$600 for a pair? These guys could make a killing!Thanks for sharing, I'll have to keep them on my radar.

Posted by [Ironman By Thirty](#) | [November 23, 2010, 10:27 am](#)

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- >They are right in line with another semi new company Planet X, trying to make it in this crazy wheel world. If they maker clinchers that cheap, I will check them out.

Posted by [Big Daddy Diesel](#) | [November 23, 2010, 10:53 am](#)

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- >I love America! Identify a need, fulfill that need – there is definitely a need for more affordable wheels! Wishing these guys the best!

Posted by [Jeff - DangleTheCarrot](#) | [November 23, 2010, 4:02 pm](#)

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