

Hunt push ahead of the pack with tubeless-ready wheels



Tom Marchment set up Hunt wheels with his brother Pete

Tom Marchment

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Tom Marchment lives and breathes bike wheels. That much is evident when the conversation turns to mandrels and injection moulding of hard nylon rim inserts.

All of which are essential for the development of a tubeless-compatible carbon wheel, and also why, according to Tom, many wheelbuilders haven't really got round to it yet.

Tom and his brother Pete have made tubeless compatibility their speciality. This is a new method of attaching a tyre to a bicycle wheel which does not require an inner tube and instead uses a sealant to prevent air escaping. The benefits compared to the standard tubular or clinchers rest in the reliability. Get a thorn in a tubeless tyre and the sealant comes along to plug up the hole before any air has had the chance to escape.

It isn't the only reason Hunt Wheels was such a success from the moment it launched in August 2015, but it is one of them. The brand is one of three under the Sussex-based ITS Cycling umbrella, which the brothers also own. They started with

Innertubeshop.com before launching Hunt, which some could find a little ironic given the tubeless nature of Hunt wheels. ITS employs six people and pride themselves on a “cloud-based” operation. “If any of us loses a laptop we we can be operational again from any other machine within ten minutes.” They’ve also got their 63-year-old dad on board to help develop a pair of gloves. “He’s a mechanical and production engineer as well as an avid cyclist, still achieving sub 24 minute 10mile time trials.”

Quality is another factor for the success of Hunt, and the price. Hunt have priced themselves at the middle of the market in the sort of bracket that would get you a reasonably decent but largely unremarkable wheel for your money. Hunt has now changed all that.

The brothers developed a capsule line of aluminium wheelsets - four suitable for rim brakes and four suitable for discs, with rim depths varying from 24mm to 28mm. The carbon wheels are a new line which Tom says require a whole new level of production: “We know a lot of the suppliers and that gives us the flexibility to choose who we think is best for each product. It is hard to manufacture a carbon wheel suitable for a tubeless tyre, it has to be very accurate.”

Quality of manufacture and design is more typical of wheelsets at triple the price - another reason for Hunt’s seemingly instant success. Hunt has been able to price its wheels so competitively thanks to the way the brothers have set up the business.

“We have unleashed ourselves of the constraints some other companies have,” he says of Hunt’s direct selling model. Products are sold for the most part via the company’s website and only to a select few independent bike shops. This allows a lower price point because margins are lower. Hunt can therefore offer you an alloy disc-specific wheelset and you’ll still have change out of £350.

“We understand there are riders who are like ourselves. A large section of the market are not affluent people. If they spend £2,000 on a set of wheels they can’t spend it on a training trip but if they buy a set of wheels from us it means they still get to go on that trip.”

Tom and Pete have a deep knowledge of their customers, thanks again to their direct sales model, which Tom says also offers unrivaled market insight. No need for market research when you have face-to-face contact.

“We actually want to deal direct with customers because that feedback and communication is so valuable to us. Every time you add a layer between you and the customer you lose a bit more information about what it is the customer wants and how the products are performing.”

They are performing, by all accounts, remarkably well. Most notably when they carried Josh Ibbett and his Mason bike to victory over the 4,000km Transcontinental race across central Europe in the summer.

In the Hunt customer’s eyes though, there’s always room for improvement, or at least a new model.

“We record all the feedback that comes in and we take a lot on board - quite often it’s new product suggestions,” explains Tom. “The gravel disc is a good example. We have tailored that wheel a bit more for heavier riders or long distance gravel riding which is particularly harsh. So we test those wheels with heavier weights and they have 28 spokes instead of 24 and accommodate a wider tyre.”

Aspects such as actually listening to customers seems to be paying off. Pre-orders gave Tom and Pete reassurance when they launched. All the same, it was still a nail-biting time.

“When you place that first order and you’ve got to persuade the missus that it’s the right idea to be spending tens of thousands of pounds on all these wheels that you may or may not sell. That was the only time it was a bit scary. But the pre-orders put us in a much stronger position. We were re-ordering two weeks after we launched our pre-orders.”

Tom and Pete have years of bike industry knowledge as well as cycling miles under their belts. In Tom’s case working with established wheel brands that have become household names. Pete, who concentrates on ITS Cycling, is fluent in e-commerce. This industry knowledge meant a lot of doors were already open.

“My background is working with some of the people in the far east,” says Tom. “One of our key partners is someone I met eight years ago at a dinner in Taiwan when I was working at Kinesis. I met a lot of suppliers and understood how things work. It’s that thing where they trust you because they understand you are someone who has a bit of experience.”

All Hunt wheels are handbuilt in Taiwan. Tom is quick to point out that this is common practice. It’s just that a lot of manufacturers would rather not mention it.

“Probably 80 per cent of wheels and bikes are probably built over there,” he says. “We are very honest about what we do and we feel like we’re just telling people about the facts of the production process.”

If you ever wondered if honesty is the best policy you only need take a look at ITS’s numbers - £500,000 turnover in the past 12 months. “We are on target to almost double that next year in terms of our growth rate and the way we are looking we are aiming to be in the region of £10 million turnover in the next eight years or so not massive but a good size.

“It’s difficult because when you’re small, you can put these plans in place, although we’re not kidding anyone, it’s only our own business. We are investing our own money but that has to work very hard for us - we’ve got some great ideas but we’re not going to compete with Mavic in five years’ time.”

The way Hunt are going they might not be as far off as they think.

Review: Hunt x Mason 4-Season disc wheelset

The thing that goes through your mind as you are riding along, apart from whether

your tyre is going down because the road feels unusually smooth, is how did they do it? How can you create a pair of wheels this good and sell them for £350? And if they can do it, why doesn't everyone else?

Hunt despatches its wheels with a pair of branded skewers, spare spokes, nipples and enough adapters and attachments for most eventualities, many of which you shouldn't need, especially if the discs are already fitted to your wheels. The idea is of course that you should have nothing to worry about other than attaching the wheels and riding.

Which is precisely what we did, both on, and off-road. The first noticeable aspect is the weight. If you're used to a chunky set of winter wheels, then a 1.585kg wheelset is up there contending with the best of them and when you pick your bike up after you've fitted them you'll be amazed at how this transforms the weight of your machine.

Hunt wheels are manufactured from a lightweight 6061-T6 heat treated anodised alloy with a 17mm tubeless-ready rim bed (They will fit Schwalbe tubeless tyres for you for £99 per tyre). This might not mean a lot to many until you start riding. The wider rim bed (the bit the tyre fits on) allows for a wider tyre which subsequently results in a lower rolling resistance and a smoother ride. The tubeless-ready nature means you can run traditional clinchers or the new, more expensive but less prone to puncture tubeless. Hunt has laced these with PSR reinforced Round Triple butted J Bend spokes and brass nipples which won't rust. Then at the centre they used dependable Japanese Ezo hubs.

The build offers a stiff, solid, comfortable ride with the feeling that you got some decent value for money. And that's before we even start on how they look. These are far from a flashy, extravagant looking pair of hoops. Hunt have instead decided to go with a design ethos veering more towards the understated. The branding is low-key but noticeable and the rims that matt-anodized black offers the sort of stealth treatment every cyclist longs for.

"You do want to present a good image," said Tom Marchment. "It's like the clothes you wear. Those things about our qualities and ethos are important but also it has to make my bike look good."

If you've set a grand aside for a wheelset, take a look at Hunt before you part with your cash. You might find exactly what you're after for a third of the price.

If you're after carbon, Hunt is about to launch a range of those has been launched, too.

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£349

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