

Zipp Firecrest 303 Tubular Wheels

By TRP Staff

I've tried to write this about ten times this week. First, I went down the road of talking about Tom Boonen's back to back victories at Paris-Roubaix and Tour of Flanders riding Zipp Firecrest 303 tubular wheels. If they worked for him, what normal race or ride would equal the punishment those races dish out and what rider could demand more from, arguably, the most important set of performance parameters in the bicycle racing system?

Nah. While cool, it really doesn't mean a lot to me. I am a "heavy" rider (certainly heavier than Boonen) and I don't have a team of trained professionals making

sure I start each adventure with a perfectly maintained set of wheels. I pump up the tires, spin them to see that they are in true, and take off. Great wheels have to be sturdy, reliable and not require much tinkering or maintenance. More, when I glue tubular tires, and I've glued more than a few, I don't have the team mechanic Mr. Boonen has, who probably has attached more tires than I have ever owned. I am sure his tires are perfectly straight, the backing strip is evenly saturated, and the glue has set properly before attaching the final glue layer before mounting it on the rim. If he flubs a bit, I am sure he starts completely over. Whereas, I have never NOT ruined the t-shirt I was wearing, and while I believe I'm pretty good, there comes a point where good'nuff is, indeed, good'nuff. As for challenging terrain, maybe his is more challenging than mine, but I've got the triple RR track threat in Saginaw, the bumpy bridge in Watauga, and of course there is Harmon "Road" in Copperas Cove (see weight of rider, above).

So I changed my mind. I took the scientific approach through a long conversation with Zipp's Tech Master Guru Dave Ripley. Mention 303s and/or Firecrest, and he will tell you everything you wanted to know, from the gluing strategy, to the advantage of the new spokes and hub design as expressed in watts. Tire widths, tubular versus clinchers, brands of tire, tubular tire bed design – all of these subjects are mere enticements to conversations displaying just how much thought, effort and design innovation Zipp put into these newly redesigned wheels. It was a great conversation and since this is my third iteration of 303s (not counting the 303 front / 404 rear clincher combo I had for a while), what I gleaned from the conversation was that the engineers really both listen to high performance riders and ride themselves. Each step in the 303 story has been one of evolving excellence with both innovation and refined improvements. It is a lighter, stronger, faster, less rolling resistance wheel – scientifically tested to prove all that. But, while I sort of understand all of this scientific stuff and did pass high school physics, I went to school in the 60s and none of this stuff was very important to me, so I only partially understand it now.

But I do ride bikes. Over the years, I have been lucky enough to ride a lot of bikes and most of them are superlative. This is where I can speak from some authority. My standard "special occasion" wheel (another name for race wheel – but what isn't a race?) was the 2009 Zipp 303 tubulars. Before I started to test the new ones, I switched off the Zipp 101s (my everyday wheel) to spend a couple of rides on the old 303s so to get myself ready for the real question at hand: Could I notice the dif-



ference, and if I did, would it be enough to justify the purchase of the new Firecrest wheels? For anyone considering upgrade wheels, this is an essential question. New Zips are expensive. Wheels with just a few years and maybe not so many miles can be had via Criagslist or eBay for considerably less than you would pay in the shop for new ones. In other words, are they worth it? Is it real or is it marketing?

The first ride was on the stiff carbon Cinelli XLR8R-5. I had to readjust my brakes – not just loosen them - but undo

the bolt and readjust the cables. There was simply not enough play in the standard configuration to accommodate the wide Firecrest rims. I was out on the Saturday, ride so I had jumps, tracks, chip seal, hills and multiple sprints. Oh, yes, it was Texas in February, so there was wind, too. I pumped them up to 125 psi and clipped in.

In a word: "Incredible!" (You may insert the appropriate expletive yourself) There was an immediate and noticeable difference. I didn't have to look for it; my knees noticed on the first hill and my heart and legs were not far behind. On the way home, I thought about how to describe it beyond, "Oh man, these are so much better." It's hard to believe, but it's true, it's true." [Think Blazing Saddles.] After a few more rides, I switched them over to the Moots, and, again, experienced the same characteristics.

Let me try to be more specific. There seems to be a lot less road resistance, which is another way of saying they're faster with less energy. My old 303s were in perfect shape – the difference really, really (really) is the new design features of the rim and hubs. Where it really seemed to shine was both in climbing and riding in windy conditions, as they are stiff and steady. There isn't any twitchiness about them and they really don't catch the wind as much as the old 303s. There is an overlying sense of wind-slippery strength about them as they took out whatever road obstacle maneuvering I put them through.

Net: I got rid of the old set. The upgrade is enough to spoil you forever and always. You can't go back. Now, to be fair, the hole for the tire valve is a bit wide and unless you treat the extension with some electrical tape and a "straw housing sleeve," it will click and drive you (and those around you) nuts. Once addressed, however, they are as silent as a stealth fighter. I can't afford useless glitz no matter whose name is on it, and I am not so great an athlete that I can afford stuff that doesn't work. The Firecrest Zipp 303s are worth their price (Front wheel \$1,035 / Rear wheel \$1,265) which makes them expensive. From my experience they're an investment in speed, and based on their ability to stay perfectly true and the bearings smooth after how many trips across the RR tracks, a long term investment at that.

With apologies to Jackie DeShannon and Donna Weis (Bette Davis eyes):

Loud decals on carbon rims ...

"width" another huckster's spiel?

But you and legs prove their worth ...

'cause you've got Tom Boonen's wheels.