

The Scoop on Tubeless

IN 2006, AFTER A TWO-YEAR DELAY, SHIMANO AND HUTCHINSON LAUNCHED ROAD tubeless. The concept is simple: The rim and tire casing are airtight, so there's no need for a tube. Hutchinson said road tubeless would be as easy to use as clinchers, but with the ride quality, efficiency, flat resistance and security ("impossible to roll off the rim" in the case of a flat) of tubulars. Tubulars remained the lightweight kings, but if you flatted with road tubeless, you could simply insert a tube to finish the ride and repair the punctured tire later with a patch or glue. If you weren't ready to completely commit to road tubeless, the wheels could also be used with standard tires and tubes.

But the launch saw only a single set of wheels, Shimano Dura-Ace 7801SL, and one set of tires, Hutchinson Fusion. And that remained the only option into the first half of 2008. Though there was a lot of interest in the technology, many bike and component makers sat on the sidelines.

Midway through 2008, a number of other manufacturers jumped aboard. Campagnolo announced a pair of tubeless-compatible road wheels, IRC announced compatible tires, Hutchinson said it will bring in Corima's Aero+Tubeless wheels (branded as Hutchinson) as well as expand its tire offerings, and Shimano planned to not only expand its high-end road-tubeless wheel offerings but also to introduce a lower-priced tubeless wheelset. The biggest news was that Specialized will support road tubeless with both its Roval wheel models (with rims made by Campagnolo) and Specialized-branded tires (made by Hutchinson). Specialized's commitment to the product and, ostensibly, the accompanying spec on its bikes, will get road tubeless into the hands of more riders quicker than any other action.

Questions remain about why the cycling world needs a third way to put wheels and tires together. BICYCLING's reviewers can't say enough about the ride quality, cornering grip and feel of road tubeless—it's phenomenal. So far, the tires seem more flat-resistant than clinchers, and they're certainly much easier to mount and change compared with tubulars. Claims of reduced rolling resistance are harder to quantify. Although some road tubeless proponents have boasted a 20 to 30 percent reduction

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in rolling resistance, Continental, which does not make a road tubeless tire, says that its testing indicates that road tubeless has more rolling resistance than tubed tires or tubulars. If you want to make your head spin, Google "bicycle tire + rolling resistance" and get ready to drop into a deep, dark rabbit hole.

Testing rolling resistance in the real world is difficult, which is why such data is, as far as we can tell, nonexistent. The subjective comments on road tubeless efficiency are nearly unanimous: They feel very fast. (See our review of Hutchinson's RT1, at left.) That's why we look forward to further testing and sharing the results with you.—M.P.