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I'LL TAKE THE WORKS

MERLIN'S NEW CR WORKS RACE BIKE TAKES TI TO A WHOLE NEW LEVEL. BY BILL STRICKLAND

I'll disclose my bias up front: Having tested several hundred bikes in my career, I can appreciate the characteristics of titanium bikes, but I do not desire them. I would never buy one. Most are too sedate for the way I like to ride. And I find that those designed to be quicker and stiffer feel skittery compared with competitive models made of carbon, aluminum and carbon, or even ti and carbon. So I'm dumbfounded to find myself lauding the Merlin CR Works for its ride quality, one that's as sharp and snappy as the best full-carbon and aluminum-carbon race bikes I've ridden. How is this possible?

1 Two seasons ago, when I raced beside Merlin designer Tom Kellogg (who also builds his own bikes at Spectrum) and saw him on an unlabeled prototype of the CR Works, the first thing I noticed were the chainstays. The stout, 1-inch diameter stays echo the hourglass pattern of the seatstays, while maintaining as much roundness as possible, which imparts a striking amount of lateral and torsional stiffness. The rear never feels as if it bleeds away any energy you put into the drivetrain, nor does it get washy when pushed in corners, or on low-cadence, high-torque climbs.

2 The top tube is the bigger innovation, says Kellogg—which surprised me. When's the last time you thought of the top tube dictating a bike's character? Through an intense combination of butting, tapering and lateral ovalizing that Kellogg says might make it the most refined tube ever, the structure maintains some of the vertical compliance ti bikes are typically prized for, while imparting a precise, confident feel to the front triangle. In hard corners and high-G descents, the bike cuts lines as if it's slicing into the pavement.

3 There's other tech wizardry going on, as well. The tubing is size-specific 3/2.5 ti (which has a greater ability to resist twisting forces than 6/4 ti). It's cold-worked, which enhances its natural character, says Kellogg, and can now be sourced in ways that were until recently impossible. "To give you an idea, when I design a tubeset now, I can specify gauge tolerances of 1/1,000th of an inch. I can butt anything and everything," he says.

4 One place Merlin didn't push boundaries was with geometry, which was a good decision. Our size-medium test bike, a team-issue model from the Rite-Aid domestic squad, had matching 73.5-degree head- and seat-tube angles, 55.5cm top tube and 41cm chainstays—a proven, neutral setup equal parts aggression and comfort.

PRICE: \$2,700 (frame only); \$4,600 (w/ Ultegra)
WEIGHT: 17.62 lb. (M) SIZES: XS, S, M (tested),
ML, L, XL FRAME: 3/2.5 titanium FORK: Real Design
carbon COMPONENT HIGHLIGHTS: (as tested)
Shimano Ultegra groupset, Real Design Supersonic
60 wheelset; FSA SLK carbon seatpost; Deda
Newton stem INFO: merlinbikes.com



