

**EDITORS' CHOICE** PRODUCT REVIEW, The Good, Bad & Ugly

# ROAD BIKE

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**ACTION MAGAZINE**

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RoundTail



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# AN ODE TO CREATIVITY

How one man is attempting to improve cycling by doing things differently

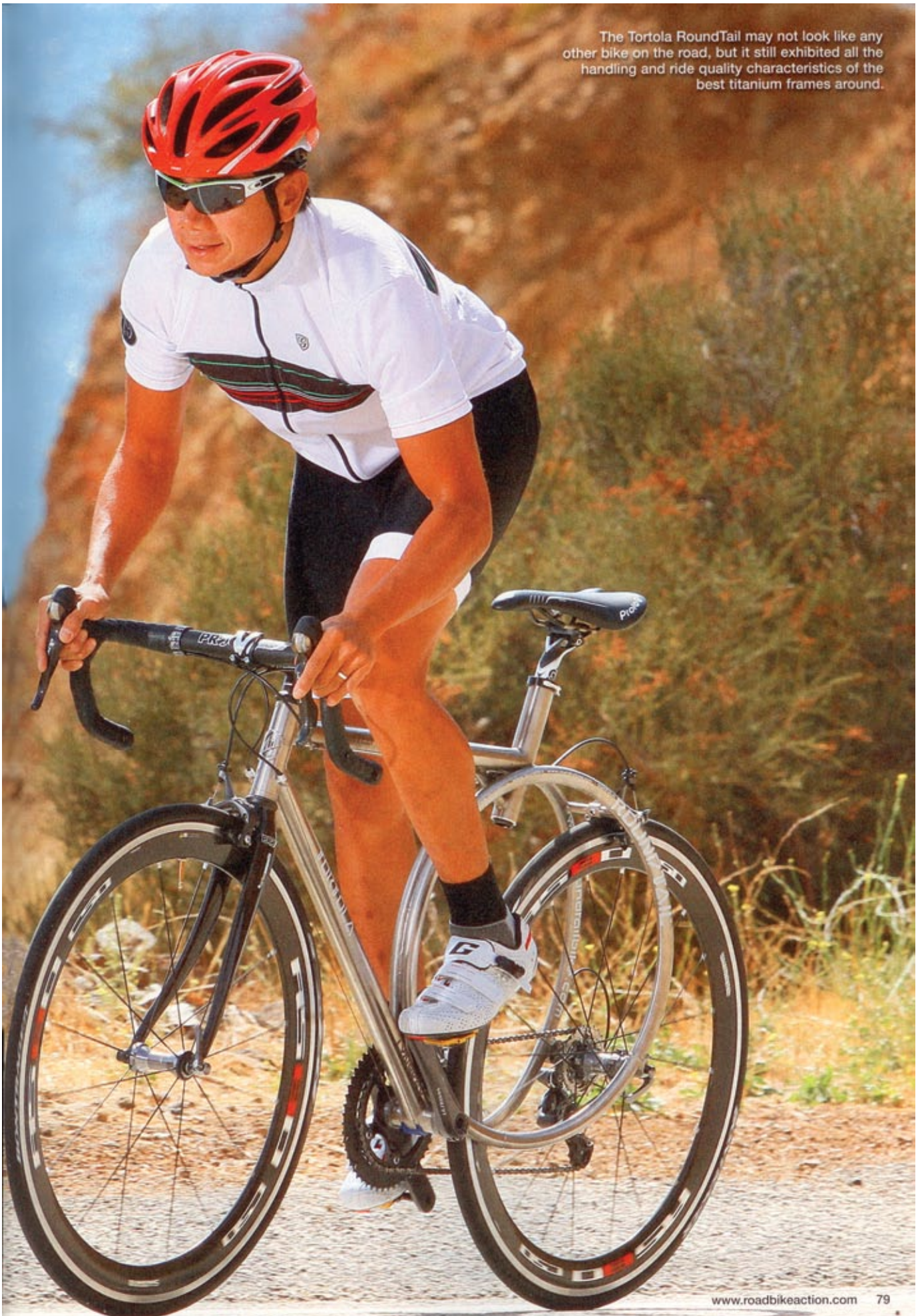
By Zap

➔ I have to say, it's been a long time since I've simultaneously felt a similar sense of doubt and enthusiasm about a new bike as when I first laid eyes on the Tortola RoundTail. In fact, it was way back in the late '80s and early '90s when the traditional world of bicycle frame design was being upended on what seemed like a weekly basis. From Richard Cunningham's steel X-Frame Mantis to the Trimble Carbon Cross bike and everything in between, the double-triangle frame seemed like little more than a speed bump on the way to designing and building a better frame. Well, at least as far as the individual designers were concerned.

All along, though, the diverse world of road bike designers have remained steadfast in a singular belief that, other than the occasional special-needs bike, there is no reason to detour from the proven efficiency of the double-triangle frame.

And then came Lou Tortola. Lou has been a lifelong cyclist who one day came back from a ride in the upper reaches of Michigan when the proverbial lightbulb in his head went off. Ever since that late afternoon day on November 16, 2010, Lou's life has never been the same. And he is adamant that all it takes is one ride on his radically different RoundTail for your life to change forever too.

The Tortola RoundTail may not look like any other bike on the road, but it still exhibited all the handling and ride quality characteristics of the best titanium frames around.





## WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT

Trust me, I know exactly what you're thinking to yourself as you look at the photos of this bike: "What the heck?!" When Lou first visited the plushly carpeted, well-lit RBA offices last spring, he brought with him an aluminum prototype that, frankly, left everyone snickering as well. Not surprisingly, despite our skepticism, for Lou Tortola, the RoundTail bike is one of the more fundamentally sensible things in life.

As Lou enthusiastically told us, with the path of road shock being dissipated by no longer going straight from the axle to the seatpost and rider, the overall ride quality of his RoundTail is greatly enhanced. Additionally, Lou said the frame had been lab-tested and shown to "provide more than 10 times the vertical compliance" of a standard double-diamond frame. Additionally, the twin-ring design was capable of absorbing up to "60 times more" of the road vibrations that riders would feel with a standard frame. The whole point of the exercise, Lou reminded us, was not all-out performance but, rather, improved comfort. "If a frame can cause you less fatigue and allows you to ride longer," he asked, "then why wouldn't you want to ride it?" Touché, Lou!

Knowing the less-than-daring

mindset that most road geeks I know exhibit, one of the things I told Lou at the time was that if he really wanted to get road cyclists interested in his bike, he needed to make one out of titanium. My reasoning was simple: the visual impact of the frame was so, oh, shall we say, severe enough that for any self-respecting roadie to overcome the inherent social stigma that the design brought with it, the bike would have to be as light as possible. In fact, Lou said he was already going down that path.

And lo and behold, at the recent Interbike trade show, there was Lou doing his best imitation of a carnival sideshow barker trying to draw people into his booth. As we stood back and watched, it was obvious that Lou had a much easier time of it due to the beautiful titanium RoundTail, which had been built for him by the renowned Ti craftsmen from Lynskey Bicycles sitting center stage.

Given the oddity of the design, I gave Mark Lynskey a call to get his thoughts on the bike and what it took to build it. Before forming Lynskey Bicycles, Mark and his family founded Litespeed Bicycles back in the day, and over the years had become the go-to house for a host of one-off titanium

project bikes. Mark said that after the Litespeed Blade TT bike that they built back in 1986, the RoundTail was indeed one of the more complicated frame projects that his shop had undertaken.

"Making the frame in titanium was not easy," recalled Mark. "I'd guess that this one frame cost about 10 times what a second one would cost, because it took several iterations to get here, and we had to do so many things for the first time. Knowing what kind of bending would be involved, we first had to find tubing with the correct heat treatment. Since the round-tail portion uses teardrop-shaped tubes, the forming process proved really difficult. It honestly took quite a bit of reverse engineering to get it right, but I'm excited about it, because it opened our eyes to some new technology. I do think we can use even smaller diameter tubing for the round-tail section, which could give the bike more of the desired ride quality that Lou is after."

## THE VERDICT

Despite Lou's invitation to experience our own RoundTail bliss with the aluminum bike he first showed us, we maintained our rule of no parking-lot test rides. But, we vowed to



Built by long-time titanium masters at Lynskey, the Tortola is as beautifully crafted as they come. Retail prices had yet to be set for either the steel or titanium version.



The RoundTail runs with the oddest front derailleur mount we've ever seen.



Lou Tortola based the RoundTails geometry on some proven Euro bikes and it paid off with consistent handling.



Stout dropouts and internal rear derailleur cable routing were nice touches.

try one in the future. Well, just days after the Interbike show, his Vegas display bike showed up, and it was time to ride. We had a few different riders give the RoundTail a try and, to a man, not a single one came back espousing a fervent dedication to the design or belief in its benefits. Still, not a single one came back with anything negative to say about the bike, either.

When we asked Lou about the

tenets of the frame's design, he said that being a "longtime Italian bike nut," he modeled the bike's geometry around some of his favorite bikes to provide a "feeling of speed, but safe speed."

The RoundTail rode well enough to qualify as a good all-around bike, albeit a funny-looking all-around bike. The bike turned in well, felt laterally stiff enough and did, in fact, provide a comfortable ride. It was more comfortable

than some traditional frames, but not as comfortable as others. In the end, we had to agree with Lou's own sell line: "The RoundTail doesn't have to replace any bike; all I want to provide is just a different choice as to what's out there." He has indeed. ■

## STATS

**Weight:** 18.9 pounds  
[www.roundtail.us](http://www.roundtail.us)