

# Tom's Santa Cruz Highball £599 (f/o)

Fast, furious and at times, frightening



After racing the Highball at the Howies Battle on the Beach, despite being sand blasted, the drivetrain felt fine. Oh, how wrong I was. It's taken a couple of months, but I think, finally, I can now ride the Highball without the entire drivetrain feeling like it's been lubricated with sandpaper. I put a lot of blame on the Rotor Rex cranks' chainring, which I felt wasn't as smooth as SRAM's offerings, but following a cleaning session, including cotton buds and toothbrushes, I take back what I said about the Rotor ring.

I still love the Rotor's quirky ovalised chainring. In the past, when I've run 1x drivetrains I've stuck with a 32-tooth ring up front, but I'm now running a 36T. With a trip to Scotland looming, I was nervous about the relatively high gear I'd be pushing up big hills, even though I've fitted a 40T Hope T-Rex range extender sprocket. There was no need to fear – pushing higher gears makes getting through the 12/6 o'clock position harder, but Rotor's ovalised Q-Ring lowers the effective gear through this part of the pedal stroke, making it possible to

run a larger chainring. The thick/thin chainring doesn't feel quite as refined as the SRAM ring did on my Orange 5, but I've only lost the chain once or twice in four months, which isn't too shabby.

As ever with long-term test bikes, they're the mules to which we strap random bits of test kit. As such the Highball has been living a split life – half of the kit is lightweight race stuff, while other bits are steadfast in their trail orientation. Take the fork. When I originally built the bike, a Niner RDO carbon rigid fork was plugged in, attached to a stubby, and not light, Truvativ stem. This theme's continued with the latest fork that's taken the RDO's place.

The Lauf has landed. If you kept pace with Eurobike last year you'll have seen loads of people hopping about on an odd-looking carbon fork, which nobody knew much about. Well, we got one, and it fell to me to pop it on a bike. 60mm of undampened, leaf-sprung suspension has had me zipping around dry and dusty trails with at least some control, if not masses. It works but its application is pretty limited in our view. Throw it into something technical and fast and the lack of lateral stiffness



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### UPGRADES

**ROTOR REX 1.1 QX1 CRANKS** £375  
www.rotoruk.co.uk  
**MAXXIS IKON TYRES** £50 (each)  
www.maxxis-bicycle.co.uk  
**LAUF FORK** £628  
www.laufforks.com  
**TOTAL** £728

### MY PLANS

**EXTRA COMFORT**  
Some (proper) suspension will be added soon, and I'd like to shift some weight and maybe improve comfort with a carbon post.

makes steering more of a guessing game. We're reviewing it fully soon. I'd been clinging on to the Schwalbe Thunder Burts for months, making excuses for their lack of wet weather performance by banging on about just how fast they were. Well, the time came to regain some front wheel grip, so I attached a pair of Maxxis Ikon to the Reynolds wheels. Okay, they may be racy, but it's been dry, right? I haven't bothered setting them up tubeless yet, although both wheels and tyres are ready to ditch the

tubes. Depending on where the build takes me over the coming months I may lose the tubes to shift some weight. They're a touch heavier than the Thunder Burts, but they're not exactly heavy, and they make slinging the bike into corners a little less scary. So, we've dealt with the gears, the fork and the wheels. What's left? Ah yes, the brakes, Hope Tech 3 X2 to be precise. They haven't overwhelmed me, but I'm going to give them a chance. I'll try some softer compound brake pads to see if I can eke a

bit more power out. I like the levers. They're the right fit for my hands, and with adjustable bite point and reach, I've been able to set them up just how I like them (close to the bars). Aside from the power, the only issue I've had is that I lost the retaining pin, and thus the pads in a Bristol wood. After six months, the poor Highball needs a bit of TLC. Little creaks and squeaks are appearing, so a full grease and re-tighten of relevant bolts is needed. I'm suspecting the cranks and bottom bracket to be the sources of the main creak, and with the cranks' pretty poor instructions, I'll have to be careful to make a note of what goes where when I take them apart. I've also had to re-tension the spokes in the Reynolds wheels. To be fair to them, when I rode in Scotland I wasn't exactly being 'careful', and they are a pretty race-focused set of wheels. I think I've exhausted testing on the Lauf fork, and

I'll be happy to move on to something new. The Highball encourages you to push hard, take the more fun lines, and needs to be unleashed as a proper trail bike. I've got an idea of what's going on next, but before I get too excited, I'll probably have to fight off a few others first. The travel will double to 120mm, but the quiriness will remain. I'd like to change the finishing kit a bit. The Truvativ AKA kit is solid, dependable and not too expensive, but I think there's a bit of weight that could easily be lost here. A carbon seatpost should also make the aluminium frame a bit more comfortable on longer rides.

### TESTER SAYS...

The Highball is just waiting to shed its semi-race build and turn into a fast trail bike.

