

AXS? DIZ? No thanks. If you're shopping for a wireless drivetrain upgrade, here's why the EDS GeX gravel groupset from Chinese brand Wheeltop should be on your list.

By **JON MINSTER**

WHEELTOP FIRST BLIPPED ON MY RADAR a couple of years ago via Bicycling U.S. Dan Chabanov, the gear editor over there, had lots of positive things to say about the Chinese brand's wireless road groupset, called TX, which he tested thoroughly through the muck and cold of a Pennsylvania winter.

Looking for a reseller in South Africa, I ended up in contact with Michael Murphy – a legend on the local road-racing scene, and the man in charge of Raceworx, a component manufacturer and importer of one foot in Simon's Town and the other in China.

What I learnt from Murphy blew my mind. The idea of creating a wireless groupset good enough to compete with SRAM and Shimano actually came from right here in SA! Murphy and Raceworx joined a global consortium that included partners in Malaysia and Japan, and a factory in China that could handle the production of such a complex product, and they spent three years developing their first derailleur.

And instead of just copying what others were doing – almost impossible anyway, given SRAM's extreme penchant for patents – they designed it from scratch, putting the rider front and centre and opting for what makes cycling sense, not just business sense.

WHEELTOP EDS GeX

Shopping for a wireless gravel groupset? Yes, there is an option that doesn't start with 'S'.

UPGRADE!

Get a dose of cycling joy with these fun and practical upgrades for your bike and wardrobe.

"Our motto is fairly simple," Murphy says. "Put bums on seats. The more people we can get onto bikes, the better for the entire industry. We want EDS to be affordable, versatile and practical, for all riders."

One of the headline features of all Wheeltop groupsets (not just the gravel one reviewed here) is that you'll definitely be able to use it on your bike, with the parts you already have. You can set the derailleur to shift three gears or fourteen, making it compatible with just about any cassette and chaining combo out there.

This radical move frees you from the endless upgrade cycle that most brands force you into – and immediately made me love the product. There's even a rim-brake groupset, if you want to go wireless on an older road bike. And why not?

Another key difference between Wheeltop and its competitors is that all EDS derailleurs use an integrated

battery. In other words, you can't remove it; you have to charge it by taking your bike closer to a power outlet, or by using a USB power bank. We'll delve deeper into this aspect a little later.

BUILD QUALITY AND SET-UP

My review groupset was the EDS GeX v2a gravel group, which Raceworx installed on an Elves Mori AeroX frame (see the review of the bike in last issue's Bike Buyer's Guide). The rest of the parts were all courtesy of Raceworx: a 42t chainring on alloy cranks, and a super-lightweight, oil-slick 9-50t cassette – a combination that offers plenty of plenty of range for almost any terrain, whether gravel or tar.

The GeX components certainly look the part, with a modern, robust design that will complement any bike.

There are no shiny silver bits; just understated black.

Linking the parts using the companion app was seamless, and I was soon able to play with the settings. There are three programmable buttons on the shifters – two on the right shifter and one on the left. Since I was running a one-by set-up, I chose to use the left shifter button to change to harder gears, and both right buttons to shift to easier gears. You could choose to do the opposite, or go up and down on the right shifter only, or reassign the buttons if you're running a front derailleur.

When you install the system, you have to position the chain in the hardest gear and select your cassette size – 11-speed, 12-speed, etc. It should shift cleanly from there, but you can also micro-adjust each gear separately if there's some rubbing or ticking. I had to do that for the easiest two gears on my 12-speed cassette, but

once I'd sorted those limits, I didn't have to touch the app again.

ERGONOMICS AND PERFORMANCE

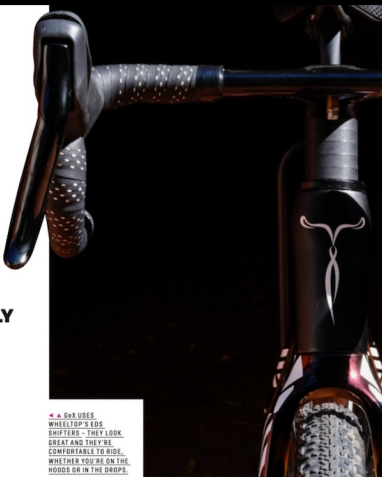
The shifters are very comfortable to use. The hoods are smaller than the latest SRAM Force or Rival and they're also far less angular, with a certain Campagnolo vibe about them.

The levers are comfortable too, but it would be nice to be able to bring them in a bit. I adjusted the reach to bring them in as far as possible, but I would have enjoyed another few millimetres. Maybe it's the size of my hands, but I like to get the tip of my finger around the lever when I'm in the drops, and I couldn't do that with the GeX without reaching. But riding on the hoods is comfortable, and the rubber feels thick and durable.

"YOU'LL DEFINITELY BE ABLE TO USE IT ON YOUR BIKE, WITH THE PARTS YOU ALREADY HAVE."

The buttons have a nice, tactile feel and you have to give them a deliberate push to change the gears, which means that you don't (often) change gears accidentally. There's a little feedback 'click', and the shift is almost instantaneous. You can choose to shift even faster by putting the system in 'race' mode using the app, but this does impact battery life.

What really impressed me was the speed at which the derailleur ran through the gears. Hold the shift button in the hardest gear and you'll be in the easiest before you can say 'Chapman's Peak'. It's the fastest-shifting electronic derailleur I've tested. This is a good thing, of course, but it can also catch you off guard. I asked Murphy whether it's possible



▲ A SIX USES WHEELTOP'S EDS DERAILLEURS – THEY LOOK GREAT AND THEY'RE COMFORTABLE TO HOLD. WHEELTOP'S ON THE HOODS IS IN THE DROPS.

to limit a hold-down to shifting only two gears, or three; he tells me they're working on a firmware update that will address those very issues. Watch this space.

The derailleur has to do a lot of work to get to a 10-tooth sprocket to a 50-tooth sprocket, but it never creaked or complained. There was a bit of creaking from the Raceworx cassette, especially at the tail end of a long, low-badly grade ride, which I attributed to the spacer that allows

the XD cassette to be installed on an XD16 freeshell (a mountain-bike cassette on a road wheel, in other words). That's not a big issue, and disappeared after I'd washed the bike.

BRAKING

Often overlooked, when you're shopping for a wireless groupset – your brain is usually full of cassette range and battery-life specifications – is how well or badly the brakes work. These work pretty darn well. They're



Photo: Jon Minster



▲ A SIX WILL WORK WITH YOUR BIKE. HERE'S THE COMPACT, BUT IT'S NOT TOO SMALL. FULL OVERHAUL, RACEWORX HAS EVERYTHING YOU MIGHT NEED, INCLUDING THIS NEAT, ALL-IN-ONE FRAME AND SET-UP, CHAIN RING.

▲ BRAKING IS EXCELLENT, WITH PERFORMANCE AND FEEL.

compatible with Shimano-style pads, and use mineral oil, also like Shimano. The flat-mount callipers are classy, with a machined alloy body, and they're compatible with 140mm or 160mm rotors. Braking feel is great on the hoods and in the drops, and I didn't experience any of the screeching or shuddering associated with brakes from a certain US manufacturer. In fact, the similarities with Shimano brakes go beyond sharing parts; the GeX brakes were easily as powerful and pleasant to use as any Ultegra or GRX brakes I've used in the past.

WHAT'S THE GROUPSET LIKE TO LIVE WITH?

Here comes the bit about the built-in battery... At first I was sceptical, simply because I'm used

to the idea of removing a battery to charge it; but there are some real benefits to an integrated system. The first is that it's properly sealed, so the derailleur is never susceptible to dust or water ingress. The second is that when you constantly have to insert a battery and take it out, you quickly wear out small, fragile parts. The contact pins in SRAM's AXS derailleurs, for example, are notorious for failing.

The third benefit is that you can maximise the space available in the derailleur, and install a higher-capacity battery. Wheeltop claims that you can get up to 20 000 gear changes on a single charge, and the battery is rated up to 800-recharge cycles. While I can't verify those claims, I can say that the battery life is excellent. I charged it once during

my three-month test period, but I probably didn't have to.

The app shows battery status on the home page, so it's easy to check. If you do need to charge it, the supplied USB cable is long enough to reach from a wall socket to the magnetic adaptor on the derailleur, or you could take a power bank to your bike. If you're nervous about running out of juice, you could always carry the cable, which weighs nothing, and give the derailleur a quick boost from a USB socket in your car, or from a phone charger, etc.

Each shifter is powered by a built-in battery – initially a negative, to me – is nowhere near as annoying or problematic as you might think. What I'm trying to say is that the standard CR2032 coin cell battery. I had to replace both during my test period. I'm not sure whether they

were fully charged to start with, but having to change them so soon did catch me off guard. You can check the voltage of the cell using the app (anything from 3.0 to 2.7V is fine, below 2.7V and you should swap it out. I started carrying a spare CR2032 in my tool bag just in case, but after installing the new batteries I didn't have another issue.

Accessing the shifter batteries is easy enough, using a 50c coin, lifting the hoods and taking note of the little arrows on the battery cap that need to line up. The left shifter suffered from some damp ingress and associated corrosion, which I fixed by adding some silicone grease to the O-ring. Maybe the ingress

contributed to the faster decline of the battery? This might be a weak point of the system; but it's easy to monitor, and it's something to be aware of when you're washing your bike.

In short, when everything is operating properly, you should get at least six months' use out of the coin cells, and hundreds of kilometres out of the RD battery.

FINAL WORD

The EDS GeX drivetrain is seriously impressive, and it becomes even more so when you look at the price.

Yes, close to R1k for shifters, brakes and a rear derailleur is not an amount to be sneezed at; but it's still R1k cheaper than a lesser SRAM set-up (GX derailleur paired with Rival shifters), and R1k cheaper than Shimano GRX. Dix. (That's the price of a decent set of wheels!) And when you consider the versatility of the system – that it will almost certainly work with the parts you already have on your bike – it becomes a no-brainer.

Shifting was fast and precise under load, and in the dust and mud. I can't vouch for the long-term durability of the components – only time will tell – but they seem to be built tough, and there's excellent local support if anything does go wrong.

Check out other reviews online – they're almost uniformly positive. And if you're in Cape Town, take a turn with Raceworx in Simon's Town, to see the various Wheeltop groupsets in action, plus their selection of bikes and other components. **B**

VITAL STATISTICS

Brake Lever Length:	140mm (adjustable range 8mm)
Derailleur Compatibility:	Shimano
Battery Type:	3- to 14-speed
Maximum Cassette Size:	50t
Max Chain Ring Size:	800mAh
RD Battery Capacity:	140mm/160mm
Component weights:	Left shifter 209g, right shifter 216g, derailleur 206g, brake calliper 118g, RD 84g for the upgrade kit (shifters, brakes, rear derailleur)
Price:	Raceworx (24 St Georges Street, Simon's Town, bicycletpart.co.za)
Local availability:	