

## Shoe Review

By Nathan Jones

Well, I looked down and saw my cycling shoes, and thought about writing a review of them. I should be completing the census, but the sites down. Or working but this is more enjoyable..

Giro Empire SLX vs Gaerne G.Stilo

So I've currently got 2 pairs of cycling shoes. Actually, traditionally I've always had 2 pairs - normally a decent pair for bunch rides and a cheaper pair for commuting.

But my cheaper pair (DHB for those interested) started giving me arch pain. So I ditched them a couple of years ago. Then the good pair died earlier this year. They were Bontrager RXL's, and I liked them a lot, both in fit and ride feel. They had survived a few crashes (that horror 2014 year for me) as well as a couple of years of 'the all-weather' treatment, so no complaints. I could have happily bought another pair, I just like to try new things.

My preference for shoes is for those that tend to suit a standard to narrow foot - makes like Bont are just a no go for me... believe me I've tried.

Having tried a few on in stores, I couldn't split my choice between the G.Stilos and the SLX's, so I ended up getting both (from different stores, too). Fortunately the cycling budget still had some cash in it (yay bike sales letting me come in well under budget!) as both of these are expensive, even with haggling for a deal.

These are both top, or near top of their respective lines. But differ in the approach each manufacturer has taken to producing a high end shoe.

Giro Empire SLX:

The first thing you notice about these is they are bright. Mine are at least - they're orange. Really orange. Fortunately they come in other colours, too. Getting past that, they have laces. Now, I wasn't looking for laces. My previous experience with MTB shoes and laces left me with a bad experience (no, they didn't get caught in the chain, they were just a pain to cinch up tightly enough).

Anyway, I picked them up. Then I tried to pick them up again because I thought I'd missed. They don't weigh anything. They are some of the lightest shoes I've ever felt. The thin synthetic upper and super lightweight carbon sole is impressive.

So impressive I didn't trust it - so I tried to flex it. It doesn't bend. Not even a hint. So I asked for my size and tried them on. Because they are laces they are infinitely adjustable and because that synthetic material is so thin and flexible it wraps snugly around your foot. There is a little elastic strap across the bridge section to tuck the laces under so they won't get wrapped in the cranks/chain rings.

Incidentally you don't need to do these up tightly. In fact, DON'T do them up tightly. When you start to pedal your foot will swell slightly. If you've done them up too tight you'll get pressure across the top of your foot somewhere and that can lead to discomfort. I was told that when I bought them and I still had to learn the hard way. Firm, but not tight. They don't slip. The material won't slide off your heel and the laces are some funky microfibre that won't loosen. It can be a pain in the arse to get the fit right initially, but once you do they won't need adjusting even after 150km of riding. Which is important as you really can't adjust these on the fly, you'll need to stop. They really are amazingly comfortable, and because of the way the sole is quite flat will apparently expand to accommodate feet much wider than mine, too.

They come with 2 inserts for arches. So you can have no insert, moderate curve or high curve to the insole depending on your foot shape. I use the medium insert.

So you have shoes that are lightweight, comfortable and stiff. Good start - but how do they ride? In short, fantastic - but different. There is a multitude of tiny holes across the shoe in place of traditional mesh vents. I was concerned they wouldn't breathe well - but you can actually feel the air rushing past your foot. So no issues there. The soles still don't flex, so efficiency is not a problem, and if you've done the laces properly up they're comfortable. What else... oh yeah - cleats.

So one of the first things you notice once you've bolted your cleats on (3-hole pattern, no idea if there's a speedplay version) is that the cleat holes are quite a ways back. No, like REALLY back. I can't push mine forward enough to match the position on the Gaernes. Is this a problem? Depends on how you like to ride. It took me quite a few rides to get the cleats into a position that didn't cause hot spots. The pedal axle just sits further back. Lots of trial and error here for me. I think I've got it now, although at some point I want another bike fit done (newer bike, different geo as well, just want to re-assess) so will see if they agree with where I've put them.

Does it change how you ride? A little. Out of the saddle efforts feel like a lot more work. Like, sprinting out of the saddle efforts, where you're trying to find every last Watt you have. General stand up and climb is fine. The trade-off is that it feels a little easier to spin, especially up hills. My 2 fastest runs up the Sackville climb from the ferry are 1 second apart and both done in different shoes. With the Gaerne's I mixed it up, standing efforts, sitting and spinning @95-100rpm - whatever was comfortable in that moment.. The Giro's I spun at >100 rpm the whole way, no standing, and no issues.

Other observations - because the laces give the shoes a fairly flat surface over your foot, covers, especially those like Velotoze, go on really easily and don't catch on anything. Also the heel grip thing is replaceable, for those that care about that. Oh, and they come with spare laces, too. The grippiness of the laces does mean they don't slip, but also means it takes an extra 30seconds or so to get the shoes off post-ride.

Gaerne G.Stilo:

Easiest way to summarise these - imagine slightly wider Sidis. In fact they are made almost literally over the road from Sidi in Italy. And I went to this particular store because for some reason I thought they stocked Sidi and I wanted to try them on my narrow feet. Turns out they didn't. But they had these. And since I was there I tried them on. Bad idea. Dear Lord these are comfortable. Which makes you start wondering if that price tag isn't so bad (enough that I eventually caved).

They are noticeably heavier than the SLX's. If you hold one of each you can feel it. Not that they're heavy, it's just that the SLX's are stupidly featherweight. Anyway, these are a nice supple microfibre/synthetic upper with a velcro toe closure that I adjusted once and have never touched since, and dual BOA closures above that.

I love that BOA system, if you've never used one you owe it to yourself to at least try a shoe that uses them on next time you're looking for a pair. You can tension the adjustment quickly to where it needs to be. If mid-ride you decide you did it too tight/loose you can reach down and with a couple of clicks fix the problem on the fly - even through mid-weight shoe covers. Although through heavy duty neoprene wearing winter gloves is awkward. Pop the dials up and the shoe just slides right off. So easy to use and to get the tension just right. They do catch on shoe covers a bit though I've noticed! I've started looking for runners that use this closure system - there's a few. Hardly any sold in Oz though.

The soles are also crazy stiff on these, too. These are a little more traditional modern (I realise that laces are truly traditional/vintage, but traditional for the last ten years or so) in style. They look like you expect a cycling shoe to look. The cleats are placed traditionally (also 3-hole design - I use Shimano cleats so I don't mind) so further forward.

Surprisingly (for the cost at least) there is no mouldable inner sole/midsection. Having said that, I've never felt like I really needed one on these either with these, it just seems to fit. It's like putting on a super stiff slipper. It seems to hug your foot. The toe box has plenty of room in it too - great for someone with wider feet.

Ride wise - amazing. I've never had a hot spot in these (was pretty much able to translate my cleat position from the older Bontragers to these, so that worked out well. Check the photo to see the difference in position - it's nearly all the way back on the Gaerne, and almost as far forward as I can get it on the Giro - still about 10mm of difference) and the pedalling feel/efficiency is outstanding. Both of these shoes have been/currently are being used by pros at world tour level. I don't have many bits of equipment I can say that about, but I totally get the shoe choice - either of these would be great.

There is an equivalent model, but built on a thinner (as in 'not as wide across the bottom', not thinner layers of carbon) called the G.Chrono that I'd like to try out at some point in the future - no toe Velcro, just 2 boa loops. Given the price of these though that's a couple of years off at least.

Final thoughts: I prefer to spin up hills, and I don't consider myself a sprinter. So if I had to choose only one of these to keep at this point you'd think I might take the Giro's. But I'd actually go with the Gaerne... Just. There's something about the way they feel on the foot that is special. Plus that Boa system! Makes life so easy. That said I still regularly lace up the SLX's, and when I start serious 3 peaks training and am regularly doing 150+km rides with some uphill spinning I will likely choose orange. Also in the wet - the Velotoze just go on so much easier!

