

Invacare Top End

By Russ Willcutt

Whether you're a professional athlete or simply want to go for a bike ride with your friends and family, this company has the equipment you're looking for.

In the early eighties, Chris Peterson was working for a provider of home health-care products, including a small selection of wheelchairs for sports. He began attending athletic events worldwide and grew increasingly interested in the design of sport chairs, eventually becoming the company's technical expert.



He soon relocated from New York to Florida to work for another company that offered him the opportunity to create his own line of sport chairs, but it wasn't long before he decided to go out on his own. Along with partner George Murray, he launched Top End Wheelchairs in 1986.

"They began by designing and manufacturing racing wheelchairs, but they soon added everyday and basketball chairs to their product lineup," according to Mary Carol Peterson, O.T., the co-founder's wife and marketing/customer service manager for the Invacare Corporation, which purchased Top End in 1993. "Rugby chairs came soon after that, and then handcycles, which Chris was particularly interested in since he's a competitive cyclist himself. In 1992 he produced the first sport-specific tennis chair, with its groundbreaking three-wheel design, which resulted in a number of patents. And his designs continue to evolve, reflecting the feedback he receives from professional athletes and consumers alike. Many of the improvements he's introduced are now industry standards."

For those who enjoy an active lifestyle—from children and weekend cyclists all the way up to professional athletes—Top End's extensive product line is sure to please, with a variety of models within each category created with an eye toward the activity to be pursued as well as the enthusiast's body type and physical disability. "One of the first things you have to do with a sport wheelchair is build it to fit the person who's going to be using it and the activity they're involved in," she

Photos courtesy of Invacare Top End

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says. "It's just like a tailored suit, where you'd want one kind for a wedding and something different for the office."

A good example of the wide variety to be found within each product line is on display in the handcycles category. "We have nine different handcycles," Peterson explains. "In our recreation line we have two versions for children and three for adults with different sitting styles, where you can sit straight up like a wheelchair or recline recumbent style, and they have either seven or 27 gears, as you'll find on the touring model. Then you have the Force series, which was designed for competitive athletes, but their level of ability factors into that classification. The Force and the Force R are for people who have limited trunk control, versus the Force G, which has been designed to accommodate amputees. A lot of soldiers returning from the war in Afghanistan are purchasing this model, in fact."

For the casual cyclist choosing the best model for his or her recreational interests, Peterson says the thing to take into consideration includes the person's physical circumstances—their ability to transfer, for instance, would play into their choice of an upright or recumbent-style cycle—and also where it will be ridden, because you'd need different gearing to ride in Colorado than you would in Florida. "The more we know about a person's disability, their goals, and the terrain where they will be riding," she explains, "the better equipped we'll be to recommend the perfect handcycle for them, including the best tires, gearing, and components."

In addition to designing and manufacturing this equipment, Invacare Top End also sponsors a team of professional athletes known as Team Invacare, with which Peterson is heavily involved, handling everything from the budget to designing their uniforms. They compete in a host of athletic events around the world, she says. "We recently had a team of seven competing in the Sadler's Alaska Challenge Race, including my husband. This is a 267-mile course, where they're covering more than 50 miles daily over five days. We have Team Invacare in several different divisions."

The company also holds the Invacare World Team Cup, which is an international tennis tournament, and is the national host sponsor of the National Veterans Wheelchair Games each year, at which it recently provided on-site wheelchair maintenance and repair to more than 600 athletes over 10 days. "We were available to them from start to finish," Peterson says. "We helped them off the plane, made sure their wheelchairs were working properly, and handled all necessary repairs throughout the competition. And these athletes were competing in everything from power

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Tennis Wheelchairs

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Wheelchairs for Other Sports

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QR.2G

soccer and table tennis to shooting, basketball, rugby, racing, handcycling, field events... you name it."

While professional athletes definitely benefit from the company's support, casual users do as well, as the designs and technologies developed for the competition machines find their way into more-standard sport wheelchairs and handcycles. "There is just so much to be gained from exercise, both physically and mentally," Peterson says, "so our goal is to design equipment that will allow everyone to join in and benefit." ❧