

# Cheetah Quick

## Motorcycle Maker Utilizes Innovative Design

By Matt L. Ottinger

**Cheetah's V8 trikes are sought out by customers throughout the United States. Customers tout the trikes' handling, speed and safety as features that are revolutionizing the concept of motorcycle riding.**

**W**hile following State Road 160 into Charlestown, a driver experiences one undeniable aspect of Hoosier living that's as certain as death and taxes – southern Indiana has many, many hills. So for some, the idea of maneuvering a motorcycle at high speeds through the beautiful, yet sometimes unpredictable, roadways may not seem optimal. But they probably haven't ridden on a Cheetah Trike.

Cheetah Trikes founder and owner Tom Walters takes a great deal of pride in the steering stability of his product, among its various other amenities.

"It's the best motorcycle on the planet," surmises Walters, who's been building bikes for 35 years. "I've worked with many bikes and have never said that before, but now I think it's true."

The fingertip steering is enhanced by a unique front end design, coupled with the stability that three wheels provide. Walters explains his trikes handle like sports cars and feature a unique cornering ability.

"When I first took one for a ride, I was so shocked that I didn't feel the load. I was almost wondering if something had shaken loose," he jokes, "but the ride is just that smooth."

Walters had previously owned another shop for many years before retiring. After rethinking his decision, he had to endure a five-year non-compete clause before opening Cheetah Trikes in 2005.

"He was on edge for five years and didn't know what to do with himself," says Tom's wife and co-owner Chilita Walters, who works with her husband seven days a week in the shop.

The two met when Chilita began working as Tom's bookkeeper five years ago. After forging an "instant connection," the two dated for several years and just celebrated their one-year wedding anniversary.

### Safety first

So what makes Cheetahs unique?

For starters, Tom explains three wheels are far safer than the standard two.

"It's unbelievably safer than a motorcycle due to the physics of being on three wheels," he offers. "There's a saying about two-wheel bikes that says if you haven't gone down, you will. But you won't go down on these."

Tom notes that owners of his trikes also needn't worry about balancing, leaning or holding the motorcycle up when stopped, thus putting less physical strain on the rider. He adds that the rear suspension he's designed doesn't allow the Cheetah to lean.

Sturdy and reliable materials are also key ingredients in Cheetah Trikes. And it's worth noting that touring the shop leaves one privy to more metal than watching Ozzy Osbourne guzzle a mercury Slurpee.

"I'm a metal man," Tom explains, noting the heavy duty nature of the stainless steel and marine grade aluminum he uses throughout each trike to ensure durability. "It's heavy, but it's safer and most dependable."

Tom also differentiates his vehicles from conversion trikes, in which two-wheelers have been altered, by contending the "pretenders" can be plagued by added weight that can reduce power. He also maintains they likely won't corner well and will often be absent a suitable reverse gear.

"From an engineering viewpoint, any time you modify something, it's going to lack something,"



he surmises. "Conversion bikes are flawed from the start."

### Comfortable ride

Tom extols the virtue of the power of his V8 engines, explaining they are also automatic – a unique feature in the world of motorcycles.

"It's a very secure feeling of power," he offers.

Due to the lower back support and smooth ride, the Walters contend the greatest joy comes from knowing some of their customers wouldn't have the opportunity to experience the thrill of motorcycles if not for Cheetahs.

"Several of our customers have said they wouldn't be able to ride at all if not for our trikes," Tom says.

"We had one customer tell us that because of a bad back, he would have to warn his wife about upcoming bumps while riding his (two-wheeled motorcycle)," Chilita adds. "That's not an issue with the Cheetah."

Cheetah Trikes also feature the radiator in the back of the vehicle, sparing the rider from oppressive heat that often rises when the part is near the front.

"A front radiator can cook you in the summer," Tom says.

### A simple business model

With only three staffers (a number that includes both owners), Cheetah Trikes may not make for the most entertaining chopper reality show, but Tom enjoys the simple approach.

"We didn't want a really big shop," he says.

One key to this simplicity is that Cheetah Trikes sells direct to customers without using outside dealers.

"Working with a dealer would get more volume, but they'd be marking up the price around 20 to 25%," he contends. "I'd rather sell direct to the customer, and it's worked for me over the years."

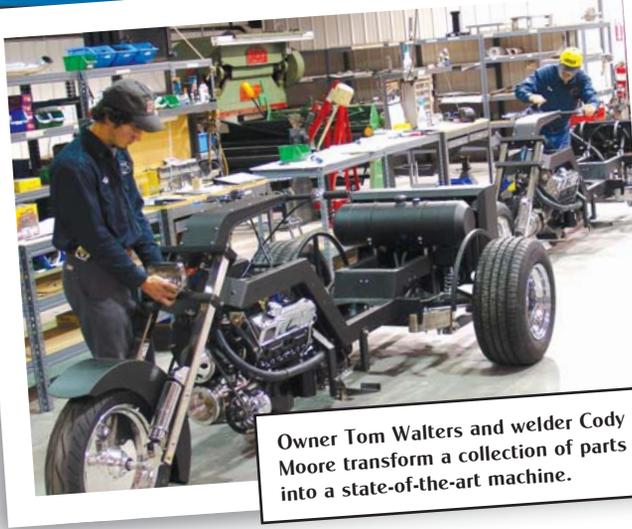
Tom also adds that by foregoing dealers, he doesn't have to sacrifice his craftsmanship.

"That's the main reason I don't have dealers. I want hands-on quality, not mass production," he says.

Additionally, Tom takes pride in being a Hoosier business and credits the caliber of Indiana's parts providers, which allows him to maintain in-state relationships.

"We're Indiana folks, and we do as much out-of-house work in Indiana as possible," he claims with pride.

"Early on, we had a hard time meeting suppliers who could provide us with the quality we expect," Chilita notes. "But we're seeing many quality businesses in Indiana now."



Owner Tom Walters and welder Cody Moore transform a collection of parts into a state-of-the-art machine.

beams. "Normally I wouldn't hire someone that young (now 19), but he's fantastic. He actually took first place in a state welding competition that had well over 200 participants."

Cheetah Trikes' owners also take pride in the geographical diversity of their customers, who span across the country.

"Our customers tend to be middle to upper class people who are near retirement," Chilita explains. "But we never know where our next customer will come from."

Tom adds that his trikes start at \$26,000 and can become as expensive as the buyer wishes based on added amenities.

"So far, no two trikes have been identical," he says.

### Satisfied customer

According to Bill Daugherty of Osage Beach, Missouri, Cheetah Trikes are the pinnacle of engineering. In fact, he simply calls his Cheetah the best purchase he's ever made. Daugherty is 69 years old and had been riding motorcycles since 1960 when he "went down" on his bike four years ago, causing him to give up riding at the time.

"I told myself if I was ever afraid, I'd get off, and I did," he explains. "But I really missed it, so I started looking at

dune buggies and even conversion trikes. But conversions have a short wheel base and I've seen some of them high side on turns, and I really needed something that would handle well."

Daugherty says he then found Cheetah Trikes online through a Google search, and it changed his life for the better.

"(Tom) is a genius," Daugherty states bluntly, noting he came to that conclusion on the 500-mile trip home from the shop. "I know quality, and I know engineering. And it's amazing how many people come up and talk to you at gas stations and in parking lots to discuss the trike. It's the most unique thing I've ever seen in trike form."

Most notably, he says his Cheetah Trike has given him the ultimate gift: "It makes me feel young again."



Cheetah's trikes are truly a labor of love. Owners Tom and Chilita Walters met five years ago when Chilita began working as Tom's bookkeeper.

### INFORMATION LINK

**Resources:** Tom and Chilita Walters, Cheetah Trikes, at [www.cheetahtrikes.com](http://www.cheetahtrikes.com)