

# PACIFIC NORTHWEST



## The Little Car That Could

**A Spokane father and son think small to solve the stall**

PLANT LIFE: A DECADE OF GROWTH • TASTE: FRUIT AND WINE • NORTHWEST LIVING: A RESPECTFUL PARTING

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# Stopping Traffic

## Can the car that Rick and Bryan built get traction?



Wherever the Tango stops, it draws a crowd and smiles. "Golf cart on steroids!" a guy yells. Others ask about performance (zero to 60 in less than 4 seconds) and batteries (80 miles per charge; three hours to recharge in a dryer socket).

Even though it's Ferrari red, zooms from zero to 60 in four seconds, and has a sensuous black leather dash with the same Motec data display found in Grand Prix race cars, this is not your typical little red sports car.

For starters, it's smaller. Or rather, smallest. At 39 inches wide and 8 feet 5 inches long, it's skinnier than some motorcycles and shorter than many a living-room couch. It runs on batteries, not gas. And, if the thing ever makes it out of Spokane and into consumer production — a big *if* — this two-person, commuter concept car could very well alleviate air pollution, cruise past freeway congestion, shimmy through urban gridlock and actually find a parking spot.



At stoplights, adjacent drivers often ask Rick Woodbury for a card and where they can buy his car.

At the moment, however, U.S. Patent No. 6,328,121 (*Ultra-Narrow Automobile Stabilized with Ballast*) is causing a jam in front of Spokane's Northtown Mall. Traffic stops, drivers gawk.

"Cool," declares a 20-year-old strawberry blonde, snapping a paparazzi shot. "Can I borrow it and drive to California?" A silvery couple in matching pink polo shirts inquires about the nearest dealership. A woman with toddlers wants to know about safety.

Remarkably, though trapped by the rubbernecks, everyone smiles at the little red car, including a mall-security guy who, instead of unblocking the lanes, gives a thumbs-up: "Awesome!"



Because the Tango is electric and does not emit exhaust fumes, you can smell the lilacs while cruising through Spokane's Manito Park.

Questions fly. How fast? How far? How long?

Top speed, 130 miles per hour. About 80 miles per charge. Three hours to completely recharge in a dryer socket, 10 minutes to recharge 80 percent in a high-current, 200-amp socket.

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Safety? It has jet-pilot seat belts and a racing-regulation roll cage; it weighs more than 3,000 pounds, about the same as a Toyota Camry, including 1,100 pounds of Yellow Top batteries under the floorboards as ballast, so it's not tippy on turns.

Storage? Enough room for a back-seat passenger, a couple briefcases and workout gear *or* a baby seat, umbrella stroller and diaper bag *or* 12 sacks of groceries.

How much? Eighty grand for the first, hand-assembled, leather-lined luxury models with 400-watt Nakamichi sound systems; later on, it's hoped, \$20,000 or less for a mass-produced people's version.

Who created this car, anyway? Rick Woodbury, a self-taught engineer and printer who once raced and sold Porsches and takes his inspiration from Tibetan Buddhism, and his son, Bryan Woodbury, a 24-year-old computer whiz and physics junkie.

Why? Two decades ago, stuck in Los Angeles jams, Rick looked at all the solo drivers surrounded by empty seats and realized wasted space was also wasted time. A narrow car could double up in lanes or even travel between lanes, like a motorcycle. Bryan grew up doodling his dad's dream, cars with hydrogen-hydride tanks below the floorboards. At Eastern Washington University, a design team led by Bryan built a cardboard-and-duct tape tricycle that took first place in the 1998 Intercollegiate Human Powered Paper Vehicle Engineering Competition. Bryan's sister Cindy was on the team. The family is big on projects.



Rick Woodbury starts every morning with silent meditation in a small Tibetan Buddhist temple in Spokane. His prayers call for an end to sickness, war and suffering, but since he doesn't know how to do those things, he decided instead to create an environmental traffic-busting car.

For their next one, father and son refurbished an ocean-going 35-foot junk-rigged schooner, Sea Witch, to sail Puget Sound. It was the sailboat, in a strange way, that launched the skinny car. "Mom hated it," Bryan recalls. Alice Woodbury never acquired sea legs, feared her family would drown, and didn't like her husband and son spending every weekend across state at Bainbridge Island's Eagle Harbor, where Sea Witch moored for free. So Alice issued an ultimatum: The boat. Or her.

Kickstart. Father and son sold Sea Witch and started work on the Tango.

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AT 53, RICK WOODBURY is a compact man with boyish enthusiasm and tremendous energy, but not in an obnoxious way. Wearing a calculator wristwatch and plaid shirt (mechanical pencils neatly clipped in his breast pocket), he looks exactly like an engineer who'd invent an energy-efficient, nonpolluting, traffic-busting vehicle. Nothing about his appearance suggests the road previously traveled.



When Spokane's meanest meter maid slowed next to the Tango, Woodbury ran into the street, afraid of a ticket, but she just wanted to talk about the skinny car.

remembers his run-in with a kindergarten teacher who told the class that thunder and lightning are caused by clouds banging together. Rick angrily corrected her — *it's electrostatic charge!* Formal education went downhill from there.

Rick's dad, Bill, was an electrical engineer who designed one of the world's first computers, then worked for IBM. He set his young son loose designing air valves on punch presses, climbing rocks, ice dancing. (The Tango is named after Rick's favorite dance.)

Rick was an avid learner but suffered in traditional schools.

Older sister Barbara



After his parents divorced when he was 12, Rick moved to Guadalajara with his mom, learned Spanish in a year, and attended the American School where he earned top grades in math and science but flunked everything else. After six months, he quit school, ran away to Haight Ashbury, did the California beach scene, dabbled in drugs, got locked up in juvenile hall for several months.

At 17, Rick joined the Tassajara Monastery and San Francisco Zen Center. The following year, he began seven years of study with a Tibetan lama who taught in Berkeley. While taking courses in Tibetan, Russian and electrical engineering, Rick helped found Dharma Press to publish Tibetan texts and books on Buddhism. In 1974, he donated the company to a nonprofit when the lama told him to leave the project, a way of practicing the Buddhist principle of unattachment.

Rick found work as a computer tech, then landed a primo position at North Face designing a density gauge for down-stuffing machines. North Face put Rick on the management fast track but then fired him because he spent too many work hours flirting with the front-desk receptionist. Rick and Alice married that year.

The vice president who fired Rick suggested he try real estate. Rick specialized in investment properties, often earning \$10,000 a month, an enormous take in the mid-'70s. The secret, Rick said, was listening to what customers wanted and getting back to them quickly. At the height of his fortune ("the peak of my stupidity," Rick now says) the Woodburys lived in upscale Danville and owned a Mercedes 450 SEL and three Porsche 911s, including a Group 3 race car he rebuilt.

"When you live in a monastery so long and then you have so much money," Rick says, "it's like: Party Time."

Rick raced in the six-hour 1980 Los Angeles Times Grand Prix, changing his kids' diapers during pit stops (his wife had burned her hand and couldn't). He finished in the middle of the pack, well behind Mario Andretti but ahead of Paul Newman.

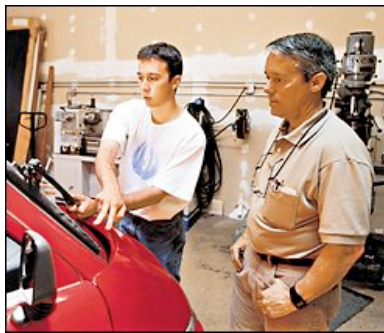
The party soon wound down. Rick's investment in the Porsche-Audi dealership in Redding, Calif., lost money during a time of high interest rates. He went to Beverly Hills and became a top salesman at the Porsche-Audi dealership (Johnny Carson among his clients), but decided to stop racing after he crashed in the '82 L.A. Times Grand Prix. Then back to investment real estate. For a year, he sold no properties. Debt piled up. Bryan, then 5, was misdiagnosed with leukemia. That was the turning point.

The family moved to a small apartment under a Zen center in the bad section of Long Beach, where Rick meditated so intently he was initiated as a Zen priest after two years. A former neighbor got him a job installing rebar, and soon he became night foreman of the L.A. Metro Rail tunnel. At \$80,000 a year including bonuses, he paid off his debts and, during the day, founded Integrated Composition Systems, the book-composition business he, Alice and Bryan still run today.

This leaves out the funky Tahoe motel they refurbished, the move to Spokane in 1995 after they heard rents and labor were good for small businesses, stints of competitive rock climbing and Latin dancing with his children . . .

"Dad is an extremist," says 22-year-old Cindy, a school teacher. "He puts his mind to it . . . then full bore onto something else."

But the ultra-narrow car was different, a dream for more than two decades. Over the years, he and Bryan talked about the car with engineers at Avista Labs, the electric utility in Spokane, hoping to run the vehicle with the lab's hydrogen fuel cells. Avista said transportable hydrogen fuel cells were years in the future, but prodded the father-son team to work on a prototype powered by batteries. The Woodburys soon discovered inexpensive lead-acid batteries could go four times the average daily commute of 20 miles *and* serve as ballast. They had to try.



Bryan Woodbury grew up with his father's dream of inventing a car that could cut through traffic. While studying electrical engineering in college, he began designing the car and hand sculpted the prototype from foam. Here, he and his dad discuss modifications to the windshield wiper.

FOR PERSPECTIVE, here's what went into a much ballyhooed pledge by the U.S. government and American motor companies to develop an 80-mile-per-gallon Supercar by 2004: a decade of political squabbling, \$1.5 billion in taxpayer money, years of foot dragging by the Big Three automakers, constant engineering. In the end, Ford, General Motors and DaimlerChrysler each built a 72- to 80-miles-per-gallon, diesel-electric hybrid concept car. But the companies opted out of retooling assembly lines for mass production, instead continuing to flood the marketplace with gas-hungry SUVs they knew they could sell for higher profit. (The saga was well chronicled last year in the Chicago Tribune.) The problem wasn't engineering vision or technical know-how; it was lack of political and corporate will.



The Woodburys considered modeling the Tango's chassis after their neighbor's Mini Cooper, but ultimately didn't.

Meanwhile, Japanese automakers have sped ahead with gas-electric hybrid vehicles while the Bush administration scrapped the drive for high-mileage internal-combustion vehicles to focus on the far-in-the-future hydrogen-fueled cars.

Compared to that, creating the Tango was

quick, cheap and clean. In 1998, Rick and Bryan took their \$20,000 profit from selling the boat and haunted junkyards and used-car lots buying parts. In Seattle, they found a 1968 Fiat 850 Spyder that had been converted to electric, trailered it home to Spokane and tore it apart in their garage. Within two months, they'd built a new frame, mounted wheels, brakes and steering components and rolled the chassis down the street, neighbor kids chasing alongside. By winter they had a drivable car, and by fall, they were racing it on autocross tracks. Working from a photo-shopped picture of a 1998 Mercedes A-Class hatchback morphed to ultra-narrow dimensions, Bryan hand-sculpted a body for the car out of Urethane, fiberglass, epoxy and Bondo, sanding large areas with a cheese grater. They hired a pro to finish and paint the body, then took the car to California.

There, they met up with a friend from Rick's early Dharma days, Bob Byrne, who'd since become a senior trader at an international money-management firm. Byrne and his wife loved the car and the concept. They invested more than \$300,000 in the Woodburys' Commuter Cars Corp.

With the infusion, Rick and Bryan refined the Tango, paid attorney and patent fees, and took the car to Montreal to show it to the Big Six automakers at an electric-vehicle symposium. They ended up staying 15 months because local manufacturers were eager to help build a new chassis, body plug, molds, gearboxes and drivetrain. Much of the work was volunteer or at low cost.

To save money in mass production, the little red car includes many parts already made in bulk; Cadillac wheelbearings and axles, for instance, and Geo Tracker doors.

But the new Tango doesn't look like any other car. With mischievous sloe-eyed headlights, a slightly flared windshield and childish curves, it resembles a race car's impish kid brother. Yet if you stomp on the accelerator, it takes off like a rocket roadster, leaving a puff of rubber smoke — and conventional Corvettes and Porsches in the dust.



Four Tangos can squeeze into one spot — two at the curb and two more alongside them — and stick out no farther than the average sedan.

In between smoothing bugs, the Woodburys took the Tango on tour last year: A symposium in Sacramento, the Earth Day parade in San Francisco, Detroit meetings with General Motors, a Capitol Hill test drive with Spokane Republican Congressman George Nethercutt at the wheel as colleagues poured out of the House and swarmed around.

"Everybody who looked at the car in detail, touched it, said, 'This is fantastic!' " Nethercutt recalls. He's pushing for provisions in the

upcoming Transportation Reauthorization Act to give tax credits to Tango buyers and let solo drivers of the commuter cars use HOV lanes.

"We need to cut down on congestion and conserve environmentally," Nethercutt said from his cellphone, stuck in traffic on I-405. "I drive to the store alone, and so do you, and so do millions of other people. I don't need an SUV to get groceries and buy hardware and shop at Nordstrom. Whatever we do, we can do in a small car."

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AT 6 IN THE morning, in a shingled temple a few blocks from downtown Spokane, the sun creeps over Buddhist statues, gongs, low prayer tables painted a little darker than Ferrari red. Rick and Bryan meditate silently in lotus position on behalf of all sentient beings, then pray aloud ... *May sickness, war, famine and suffering be ceased ...*

At 7, Rick walks two miles to work — mostly because he likes walking, not because he thinks it'll save the environment. But the Tango, he says, could have tremendous impact. "As far as getting rid of war and nuclear weapons, solving the world's hunger problem, that would be great, but I have no idea how. This car, we know how. We've done it. And if 50 million Americans started driving Tangos, the world would be better."

In 2002, 92 million people drove to work alone, according to a transportation study at Texas A&M University of the nation's 75 most congested areas. In 2000, traffic jams wasted 3.6 billion hours and 5.7 billion gallons of fuel, an amount that would fill 570,000 gasoline trucks stretched bumper to bumper from New York to Las Vegas and back. In 2000 in the Seattle-Everett area, traffic jams on peak roads delayed the average commuter 82 hours and wasted 137 gallons of gas.

Specialized cars such as the Tango could ease jams, make better use of roads and give commuters more options, says William Garrison, UC Berkeley professor emeritus and co-author of "Tomorrow's Transportation." "People want variety . . . They don't want people telling them what to do. We wealthy people with bleeding hearts say we need mass transit for the poor. The hell with that. The poor need money. If they had money, they wouldn't take transit."

Rick and Bryan believe getting commuters to hop into Tangos will be a relative breeze. The harder trick is persuading an automaker to mass produce the cars at an affordable price. Commuter Cars estimates it'll take about \$12.7 million to perform the required safety tests and ramp up a run of 10,000 economy models, called Foxtrots.

Engineers and executives at GM's Research and Technology Division, ecstatic when they first saw the Tango, tentatively offered parts at cost, distribution through a GM dealer network and \$5 million to get started, pending a solid business plan and market survey. Backing the Tango could have given GM credits under a California state law requiring 10 percent of cars sold by major automakers to meet zero-emission standards. But they rescinded the offer this past spring. GM's lawyers are suing California over the 10 percent rule.

So, for now, the Tango isn't leaping into the market. But it's still driving forward. Commuter Cars has five buyers for the \$80,000 "kit" model when it's ready. Rick and Bryan are doing final battery calibrations. Alice loves the little red car, deeming it worth her family's time because it will help other people. Cindy sewed a white veil for the Tango; it'll be her wedding coach when she's married this summer.

You may spot the little red car zooming down Spokane streets, or perhaps it'll be parked, a crowd gathered around. In that case, you'll know it's the Tango by the excited smiles of onlookers witnessing what could — maybe, might, should — be the next big (little) thing.

For information about the cars, check out [www.commutercars.com](http://www.commutercars.com) or call 509-624-0762.

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