

APEX PERFORMANCE HAS FOUND A SUCCESSFUL NICHE BY SELLING SAFETY GEAR TO THE ROAD RACE MARKET, BOTH FROM ITS STORE IN SOUTH CAROLINA AND TO CUSTOMERS WORLDWIDE ON ITS WEBSITE.

**CLARK** Hamerly certainly wouldn't be the first guy to find a new passion in mid-life. But Hamerly, along with his wife Linda Powell, discovered a new love for speed when both were decades past being teenagers. In the 22 years since, they have turned that passion into a business, selling safety gear to road racers.

While living in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Hamerly won a weekend excursion to the Nelson Ledges Road Course in Ohio through the local Porsche club. "The first time I went to the track



I knew I was hopelessly hooked," confessed Hamerly. At the age of 45, he began a new love affair, ditching one car for another. "I sold a nice 911 and bought a Porsche race car."

At first, Hamerly indulged that interest on driver education days, similar to an autocross where people can push a car to their limit in a controlled environment. But by the age of 58, he had a competition license and was running fender to fender with other racers. "I just do it for the love of it," said Hamerly, who confessed, along with Powell, that their passion ranks higher than their driving talent. "We are middle of the pack, at best," he acknowledged.

Nonetheless, "it's exhilarating to go 110 miles an hour into a corner side by side with another car, knowing that you both want to come out at the same spot," Hamerly contended. "I used to work on the flight deck of an aircraft carrier. The adrenaline rush from racing is the same thing."

But beyond the excitement, Hamerly quickly learned a lesson that every racer knows. Racing can be expensive, whether or not it's in a Porsche. But Hamerly, who at the time was an

executive with one of the nation's largest pipe and tubing manufacturers, knew how to crunch numbers and saw an opportunity to subsidize his racing budget. "I needed seats for the car and I looked at what they cost compared to what I would have paid as a dealer," he recalled. Instead of buying the two seats he needed, he bought \$3000 worth, "knowing that I could sell the rest."

From that modest beginning, Hamerly and Powell created Apex Performance, selling parts primarily to other Porsche racers in the region as a sideline while both continued their professional careers. As a part-time business, it was profitable by eliminating the overhead and employee costs that are

**When customers visit Apex Performance, in Murrells Inlet, South Carolina, they get a strong first impression of what the business is about when they see what co-owner Linda Powell calls "the wall of helmets." The helmets are stacked, shelf by shelf, from floor to ceiling and are the very first thing customers see when they walk in the door. "It's one of our staple items because everybody at the track has to have one," she explained. It also is a dramatic demonstration of the store's almost exclusive focus on safety equipment.**

significant challenges for many start-up companies. "We operated it out of our house," Hamerly explained. "It was nice from a cost standpoint because we had no expenses."

The business grew slowly but steadily. Powell quit her career first to devote her full-time attention to Apex Performance in 2003. But when Hamerly retired in 2009, it was time for a major change. As many people do in retirement, the couple left Pittsburgh for a more bucolic environment in South Carolina. And after almost 20 years, Apex Performance had outgrown being a home-based business. "When we moved, we really couldn't run it out of our house," Hamerly explained, especially since he needed room for his own personal fleet of four Porsches.

Since the move, Apex Performance has expanded into a storefront in the coastal town of Murrells Inlet, South Carolina, about 10 miles from Myrtle Beach and about 90 miles from Charleston. The location has changed and the brick and mortar storefront is a new, public look for the business. The customers, however, are the same. "We're Porsche people and the bulk of our customers have sports cars and race with the Porsche Club of

America, NASA or in historics," Powell explained. "Our core customers are the road racing crowd."

Nearly all of Apex Performance customers have the same background as Hamerly and Powell: amateurs who race for the love of it. "The majority of people we sell to do driver education days in cars they drive during the week," Hamerly added. "The majority will not move up to race professionally."

Some of Apex Performance customers are race veterans. But many are novices, who have little or no experience in racing. In some cases, they are buying racing gear for the first time. As a result, Hamerly and Powell are as much teachers as they are retailers and both stress the importance of tailoring their inventory and providing personalized service to meet customer needs.

The new retail display area is a modest 800 square feet, but fronts a much larger warehouse that stores inventory. "Only about 10 percent of our business is walk-in," Powell explained. "The majority of our business is over the Internet and our customers are from all over the place." That includes many places far-flung from semi-rural South Carolina, such as Texas, California,

www.ProFabrication.com  
**PRO FABrication**  
 704.795.7583  
*Racing Exhaust Systems*



Choice of Champions



*Racing Exhaust Systems*



**Inconel & Stainless  
 Specialists  
 CAD Capable  
 Custom Header Builder**



**By Bill Sessa**



Maine, Florida and more. "We even have customers from Australia, New Zealand and Germany."

But those walk-in customers get a strong first impression of what Apex Performance is all about when they hit what Powell calls "the wall of helmets." They are stacked, shelf by shelf, from floor to ceiling and are the very first thing customers see when they walk in the door. "It's one of our staple items because everybody at the track has to have one," she explained. It also is a dramatic demonstration of the store's almost exclusive focus on safety equipment.

With a few well-chosen exceptions, Apex Performance doesn't stock engine or suspension parts or mechanical components that are commonly found in many racing shops. But it does stock a wide range of safety gear that includes driving suits, gloves, shoes, safety harnesses, HANS devices and helmets.

Despite its compact size, the showroom displays every item that Apex Performance sells, including samples of each style of seat so that customers can take a "butt test" to determine which fits best. Because of the excessive cost of shipping seats, the store drop ships them from the manufacturers. With that exception, the remainder of the inventory is shipped to customers from the large warehouse behind the showroom.

The couple emphasize that a deep inventory is just as important to an Internet-based store as it is for a brick and mortar set up. "If you don't have it in stock, you can lose a customer," Hamerly contended. "People want to push a button (on their computer) and have it at their door."

Customers can feel just as disappointed when they hang up the phone as they do walking out the door empty-handed. "You can have every size and color of shoe, except the one they

wanted," said Powell, to caution against going light on inventory.

Apex Performance does stock a few items not directly related to safety, such as racing-quality brake pads and some fluids. But regardless of the item, everything that the store sells must meet the couple's standard for quality, based on their own racing experience. "If we haven't used it or wouldn't use it, we won't sell it," Hamerly insisted.

"I think we're familiar with this equipment because we use it," added Powell. "We think you come across to the customer better if you know what you're talking about. I think people are impressed with honesty."

That attitude is reflected in the couple's interaction with customers. "We take time with customers on the phone to get to know them," said Powell, who seems to ask as many questions as she answers. It is the only way, she believes, to make sure that customers get what they truly



EXPERTS at intricately cored ALUMINUM CASTINGS



**BUDDY BAR CASTING** is a world leader in manufacturing high quality complex precision Aluminum Castings. We offer **EXPERT** guidance through every phase of **PRODUCTION** of your sand cast aluminum product, from initial **Tool Design** to **Engineering, Manufacturing, Finishing, and Quality Control**.

Our specialty revolves around offering our clients the best service for all of your manufacturing or design requirements. Let our professional team assist you in all your immediate and future needs.

We **SPECIALIZE** in: Complicated Water Jacketed Aluminum Castings and Intricate Coring Applications with **PROVEN PERFORMANCE**.

#### **WHY CHOOSE BUDDY BAR ALUMINUM CASTING FOUNDRY FOR THE JOB??**

- We're big enough to get any job done, yet small enough to give personal attention.
- We've been around long enough that our name has become synonymous with High Quality Precision Aluminum Castings.
- We will incorporate Value Engineering into your Product lines.

**OUR ALUMINUM-SAND-CASTING FOUNDRY IS ONE OF THE MOST STATE-OF-THE-ART ALUMINUM FOUNDRIES IN THE US.**

- COMPLETE MACHINING SERVICES
- Three - 500 mm OKUMA Horizontal Machining Centers
- Two - 500 mm MORI SEIKI Horizontal Machining Centers
- 630 mm MORI SEIKI Horizontal Machining Center
- 30" x 60" MORI SEIKI Vertical Milling Machine
- In house fixture design and construction
- All FIXTURES produced in-house



**BUDDY BAR ALUMINUM SAND CASTING FOUNDRY** is located in Southern California

[www.buddybarcasting.com](http://www.buddybarcasting.com)

10801 Sessler Street  
South Gate, California, 90280.  
Ph.(562) 861-9664



To stay in close contact with their customers, Apex Performance co-owners Linda Powell and Clark Hamerly pack up a 53-foot trailer for trackside support at regional races for Porsche Club of America and SCCA, at tracks such as Rolling Road, Carolina Motorsports Park and Virginia International Raceway. "We basically pack up our showroom and take it to the track," explained Powell. "We use the trailer like a trackside showroom." Seen here is JP Michenon on the left with Hamerly.

need, especially when many of them have relatively little experience.

From her racing and sales experience, Powell knows that some types of gloves feel better on certain types of steering wheels, or that some seats fit in certain cars better than others, or that some seats work better for customers who want to drive the same car to work on Monday that they raced on Sunday.

When customers ask for a helmet in a specific size, Powell asks questions about what they have worn in the past or about the shape of their head before suggesting what they should buy. "Not all helmets fit all heads," she noted, depending on their shape. Powell even includes a tutorial on the Apex Performance website, which she borrowed from Bell Helmets, that illustrates how customers should measure their heads before shopping for helmets, as part of the store's dedication to educating customers.

The website includes other educational information, such as technical tips from a friend of the couple who is a six-time SCCA autocross champion. "We're not constantly trying to sell something," said Powell. "That gets people's attention and gives them something for free."

But all of the education and personalized service are complements to each other to reach a primary goal of Apex Performance. "We want to be a one-stop shop and outfit customers with what they need," contended Powell. "Some of our customers have never raced before or worn a helmet before and they need the whole package."

Powell is quick to note that her efforts are not to simply sell or to promote the highest priced items. Sometimes, she said, "the less expensive item will fit them better and offer better protection." She believes that comfort is the most important

## ABS PRODUCTS PISTON RING GRINDER

714-671-0728



**Faster, More Powerful Motor**

**5" Turntable for Standard Rings**

Read the great testimonial at our site!

**3 Times the Power!**

**3 Times the Speed!**

**3 Times the Grinding Surface!**

**5/16" Motor Shaft**

**5950-X - New PRGrinder**

[www.abs-products.com](http://www.abs-products.com)

**714-671-0728**



## Dry Sump Oil Systems



**The Barnes 9025 series of Drag Race pumps was introduced nearly 15 years ago. It's success dates back to 1997 when it helped Warren Johnson break the 200mph barrier. Our original Tri-lobe, individually timed aluminum rotors set the standard for lightweight, high vacuum reliable dry sump pumps.**

**BARNES SYSTEMS INC.**

**3162 Kashiwa St.**

**Torrance, CA 90505**

**(310) 534-3844 ph (310) 534-1229 fx**



The layout of the Apex Performance trackside trailer allows customers to walk through it, browsing displays that are organized just as they would be back in the store. Everything that works together is displayed together, reminding customers of items they need but might not have thought of before they walked in. "I think it's why we're popular with the Lemons and CHUMP car drivers," noted Powell. "They see one item and it draws their eye to something else. They don't think of all the things they need until they see them."

factor in making her customers more competitive on the track by eliminating distractions so they can focus on driving. "I tell them that when you first put on a helmet or gloves it can feel foreign, but after you're in the car it disappears so you can focus on turn-in points and other things on the track. If they have the right equipment, it will blend in."

That tailored approach to customer service doesn't end with the initial sale, Powell noted. She believes that it is just the first step in creating a long-term relationship with customers. "We encourage our customers to call us back and let us know how they're doing," said Powell.

Following up with customers also provides an opportunity to help them upgrade their equipment as they get more racing experience. A novice racer who might settle for a \$200 helmet or an introductory quality driving suit as a starter, for example, may better appreciate the differences

in a higher priced model only after being out on the track for a few races.

### Trackside Service

To stay in close contact with their customers, Powell and Hamerly pack up a 53-foot trailer for trackside support at regional races for Porsche Club of America and SCCA, at tracks such as Rolling Road, Carolina Motorsports Park and Virginia International Raceway. "We basically pack up our showroom and take it to the track," explained Powell. "We use the trailer like a trackside showroom."

The layout allows customers to walk through it, browsing displays that are organized just as they would be back in the store. Everything that works together is displayed together, reminding customers of items they need but might not have thought of before they walked in. "I think it's why we're popular with the Lemons and CHUMP car drivers," said Powell, referring to low-cost racing series that

**26th ANNUAL TWO HUGE DAYS!**

**Friday January 13th 1 p.m. to 9 p.m.**  
**Saturday January 14th 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.**

# PIEDMONT RACING EXPO & AUCTION

**MOTORSPORTS TRADE SHOW and FAIRGROUNDS SPEEDWAY RacersReunion**

**FEATURING**  
 Last year was a sell-out. Pre-Register for auction early!

**Vendor Space Available! CALL 919-215-3351**

Legendary Race Car Drivers ★ Autograph Session  
 Vintage Race Cars ★ Vendor Space ★ Consignments  
 BUY SELL ★ New and Used Racing Parts

**See us at Booth #2741 at PRI**

**Over 40 Short-Track Vendors  
 Over 1000 Auction Lots  
 Buy-Sell  
 New-Used Racing Parts**

**NC STATE FAIRGROUNDS RALEIGH NC**  
[www.piedmontracingexpo.com](http://www.piedmontracingexpo.com)

appeal to novices without a competition license. "They see one item and it draws their eye to something else. They don't think of all the things they need until they see them."

But the mobile showroom is popular with customers of all types, including experienced veterans. "It gives the customer the best of all worlds," Powell said. "They can try something out to see if it works." They can find out firsthand, for example, if a particular model helmet will be comfortable in the car without hitting the roof, or if a pair of gloves work well with the covering on a steering wheel. "And, if it doesn't work, they can bring it back," Powell added.

Powell noted that she and Hamerly enjoy being at the track. "You can always talk to customers," Powell noted. "But at the track it's even better because you see them use what you sell and have fun doing it."

Trackside sales run the entire spectrum of the market, from the Lemons series drivers, who run endurance events in cars costing just a few hundred dollars, to the more affluent Porsche owners. "You're naturally going to sell more lower end stuff," noted Hamerly, "but you have to appeal to all ends of the market."

As a result, the store does have some drag racing and oval track racing customers. But Hamerly noted that there are advantages to focusing on what he recognizes as his primary clientele. "We're selling more top of the end stuff that five years ago we said wouldn't ever sell," he said, such as \$1800 carbon fiber helmets that fit better and are more plush than your typical introductory model that sells for less than \$200. "We're national sponsors for Porsche racing and I think it's one reason why we're selling some more expensive things."

The couple, who were among the first 15 dealers ever approved to sell HANS devices, base much of their marketing on their staunch advocacy for safety. They attend regional orientation sessions for Porsche owners who are considering racing "so they know we exist," noted Powell.

But whether it's a front runner or a backmarker, a veteran or a Lemons series novice, Powell emphasized that the personal relationship with her customers is the biggest reward that she couple get for running Apex Performance. "It's not about making a quick buck. It feels good to help these people because we have been in their place.

"These guys all race for \$10 trophies," she added. "I tell them that if you go out and have fun, come back with a smile on your face and the car is in the same shape it was when you went out on the track, you've won and a podium finish is just icing on the cake."



## FEATURES

**STYLE:** H Beam

**MATERIAL:** 300m Forging (Made in USA)

**LENGTHS:** 5.400" - 6.400"

**JOURNAL SIZES:** 1.850", 1.888", 2.000", 2.100"

**BOLTS:** 3/8" ARP 2000, ARP CA 625 Plus, ARP 3.5, A-1  
7/16" - ARP 2000, ARP CA 625 Plus, ARP 3.5, A-1

**HEAT TREAT:**  
Vacuum Heat Treating  
Cryogenic Processing

**INFO**

P.O. Box 596  
619 N. Center Street  
Forrest, IL 61741  
Phone: 1-800-TOP-RODS  
Fax: (815) 657-9972  
roger@dyersrods.com

[WWW.DYERSRODS.COM](http://WWW.DYERSRODS.COM)

## Top Qualifier

Around the world or around the track, you won't find a higher quality line of bearings and rod ends with Aurora's proven 35 year track record.



Call your dealer for fast service!

**Aurora Bearing Company**  
901 Aucutt Road  
Montgomery IL. 60538



Complete library of cad drawings and 3D models available at:  
[www.aurorabearing.com](http://www.aurorabearing.com) **Ph: 630-859-2030**