RIGHT  Trek’s UW-Stout grad employees (left to right:) Michael Hammond ’00, Jeff Staszak ’93, Chris “Ned” Carlson ’98, Hans Eckholm ’94 and Michael Leighton ’02
Among cycling enthusiasts, Trek has gained cult status. Among its employees, it has instilled pride and teamwork.

The 30-year-old company is the home of the innovative carbon fiber bicycle frames that carried Lance Armstrong to victory — a record-breaking seven times — in cycling’s grandest event, the Tour de France. The 21-day race is the third most-watched sporting event in the world, behind the Super Bowl and the Olympics.

For five UW-Stout art-industrial design alumni, the bike industry offers an interesting culture within which to work — laid back, yet very intense. From the ultra-lightweight bikes for racing to the simple entry-level bikes for pleasure seeking, the need for new design solutions never slows down.

Chris “Ned” Carlson ’98 sums it up in one word: dynamic. “Things move quickly here, and we are an action-oriented group. It is a fitness-focused company for obvious reasons.”

“We take a lot of pride in the performance and emotional draw our products produce — both for Lance and the average rider,” says Hans Eckholm ’94. “Looking out for the interests of the end user is one of the main domains of an industrial designer.”

Less talk. More rock.
The industrial design department has adopted “Less talk. More rock.” as its motto. The designers consider themselves on the extreme edge of the Trek corporate culture. They tend to have more fun. They get messy. They make noise. And at any given moment, toys will crisscross the room like missiles, adding spontaneity and fun to a brainstorming and designing session.

“I think that is what makes us a fairly tight-knit group,” says Michael Hammond ’00 whose focus is full-suspension mountain bikes and commuter/path bicycles. “As a team, we try not to be hoity-toity. We don’t sell design. We sell bicycles. And people love to talk about their bicycles.”
“The team conducts field research to develop user-based designs,” Hammond says.

“We step into the cyclist’s shoes and create user scenarios,” says Hammond. “The process is continuous. It starts as soon as we roll out of bed every morning.”

The key, he says, is selling the experience and letting the product tell the story. And at some point, they stop speculating and discussing, and “just make cool stuff.”

Through listening, observing and interacting, their research has resulted in designing a place to store a bike’s U-Lock, creating a coffee mug to fit into the water bottle slot and developing better air flow for a child trailer so it would not become “an oven on wheels.”

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The Trek industrial design team displays some of its recent accomplishments.

Daring to innovate

Eckholm describes the company culture as “get-it-done” oriented. “If you have an idea, implement it,” he explains. “It is sometimes easier to design things that you don’t totally understand. Your naivety is often just the thing to allow a product to evolve into something new or to solve a problem that people have grown used to.”

The “Stout Five” make up almost half of the industrial design team of 12 members. The designers have various design backgrounds and experiences, which allows them to investigate problems from different perspectives. The result is often innovative.

“I enjoy being a part of the product-development cycle,” says Michael Leighton ’02 who develops pavement and cruiser bikes and aftermarket products. “Seeing our research, ideas and sketches turn into physical products on a shelf is gratifying. The most satisfying part is developing products that the user will have a special relationship with. Almost everyone can remember their first bike and how cool it was.”

Leighton says the team loves to hear feedback from customers and that they embrace customer’s ideas. In addition to researching how Trek products are perceived in the marketplace, they make a point of going out numerous times a year to encourage input directly from customers to assist in the designing process.

“I think most designers would agree that you just can’t ‘turn the designer off,’” he says.

Carlson, who designs full-suspension, high-end aluminum mountain bikes for the Gary Fisher line, sees bike design as “taking something mundane and making it cool.”

“Parts must reconcile visually and work together,” he says. “It’s like connecting the dots in a sculptural way.”

He believes part of product design is understanding the processes, working as a team, and compromising and collaborating with all departments.

The group dynamic is key, agrees Jeff Staszak ’93 who designs aftermarket products that help fill a two- to three-inch thick accessories catalog. “Do not design alone,” he advises. “The collective group is such a benefit to the end product. Many different opinions and eyes bring a much better resolution to the design.”

Cheating the wind

Recently, Trek redesigned and built, in just four weeks (versus at least four months), a faster, lighter and better performing bike for its most famous customer, Lance Armstrong. Armstrong needed the bike for his Tour de France time-trial events. Producing the new design quickly would give Armstrong and his team more time to test the bikes, to train on them and to suggest improvements. Helping riders save seconds is increasingly difficult.

However, not only did Trek beat the clock, but the new bike was 10 percent faster than the previous year’s production bike, 2 percent lighter and 15 percent stiffer — characteristics that add up to better ride performance and quality.

“All of Trek was very interested in Lance’s journey, and we often watched the race at work in the mornings,” says Eckholm.

Staszak agrees. “It is difficult not to be caught up in the frenzy. It is great to be associated with such an event, milestone and company,” he said.

“It’s a huge thing for Trek that Lance Armstrong won,” says Hammond, “but it is more important that his seven victories have brought a lot of attention to cycling in general. Whatever helps the sport, helps us.”

Carlson sums it up: “It felt good (that Lance won), but I’ll tell you what makes me feel even better. When I see an overweight person on a new bike trying to change their life, I am excited for them. When I see a kid burn down the street on his bike with a big grin on his face, I’m glad to be a part of it. And when I roll back into the parking lot with a group of friends all muddy, tired and sore after a lunchtime mountain bike ride at work, I think this place is pretty awesome.”

“I dig it. I love it. Fun job,” he grins.