



Chris Gibbs spends time with his wife Nicola De Flart during a recent sailing excursion. Gibbs was paralyzed in a cycling accident.

Special to the Sentinel

Special Wyliecat a 'dream maker' for paralyzed man

By **BEN McMORRIES**
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WATSONVILLE — The industrial park that sits in south Watsonville doesn't exactly look like a place where dreams come true.

However, amid the jumble of warehouses, railroad tracks and low-income housing that dominate the area, a boat is under construction that will allow Chris Gibbs to get back some of the freedom he lost when he was paralyzed from the waist down in a 1994 bicycling accident in Mississippi.

Up until the injury Gibbs had quite a sense of adventurous, including a stint riding in the European pro-am cycling circuit.

"I raced for a team called Castorama, I don't

Watsonville company building special boat for former cyclist

think they exist any more," Gibbs said. "My one brush with fame was a 35-mile sprint in a 200-mile race called Paris/Roubaix, the purpose was to catch and deliver water to six guys on our team."

Gibbs hasn't slowed down much since he lost the use of his legs, and his latest project is a reflection of his personality.

"I've been sailing since I was 6 or 7 years old," Gibbs said in a telephone interview from his home in Susanville. "I grew up in Benicia, and my Dad would take me out sailing on the bay with him all the time."

Gibbs said since those early days he has been enamored by the sea and with sailing.

After being hit by a car and paralyzed, spending nearly a year in recovery, laid off from his job with Chevron and then starting a career as a technical writer, Gibbs is ready for some adventure.

And the new boat will be the vehicle that takes Gibbs and his wife, Nicola, on the quest.

"You can't put a price on what that boat will do for me," Gibbs said. "I can go to Brazil, Mexico, the Caribbean or the Mediterranean, wherever I want."

Essentially, the Gibbs have decided to trade a constrained life on land for a life of freedom on the high seas.

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Wyliecat

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"I owned boats before the accident, and I bought more after," Gibbs said. "After my wife and I looked at new boats, we realized I needed something special."

After looking at various boat designs and builders, Gibbs decided he would buy a Wyliecat, designed by Tom Wylie and built by Dave Wahle in Watsonville.

There were several reasons for his choice. First the Wyliecat is a "hotrod", a sleek, high-performance vehicle that slices through the ocean with ease. Next the boat is designed for ease of operation, and its sail can be controlled by one, rather than a half dozen ropes.

Finally for a high-end sailboat the Wyliecat is relatively inexpensive — the base price is around \$300,000.

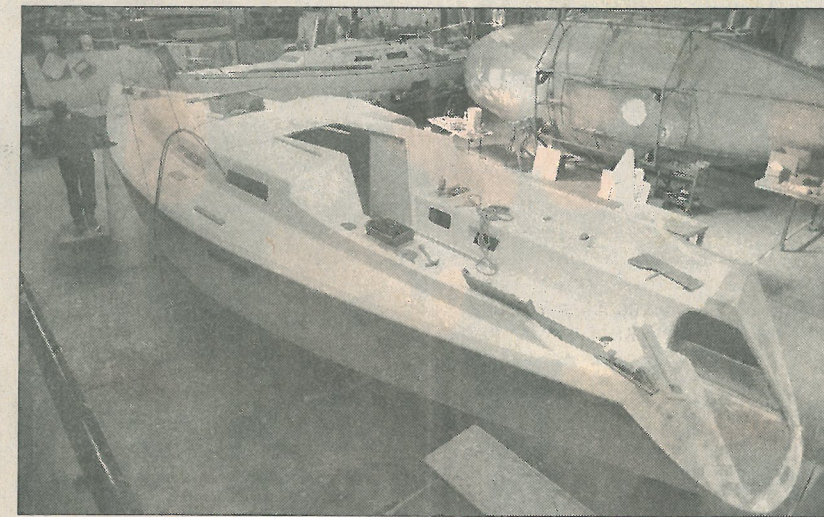
In the first meeting between Wahle about Gibbs, Wahle was impressed with Gibbs's knowledge of the seas and his ability as a sailor.

"This is the kind of boat that one experienced sailor can handle by himself," Wahle said. "But after spending an afternoon talking with Chris about what his needs were, we realized we needed to make some modifications to his boat."

The specific model chosen by Gibbs, 33, was the Wyliecat39.

"This is the first boat we've ever built for a handicapped person," Wahle said. "Wyliecat 39s usually take four months to build, this will take about six months."

Gibbs described the 39 as the Porsche 911 of sports sailboats — extremely fast, and a classic design.



The Wyliecat for Chris Gibbs includes some design and style changes.

And as a 39-foot vessel, there is enough storage room and amenities to make extended voyages comfortable.

Some of the modifications made my Wahle include an enlarged swim step that will accommodate Gibbs's everyday wheelchair, a special seat in the middle of the cockpit that moves from side to side making it easier for Gibbs to steer, and an elevator that will allow the boat wheelchair to go down into the companion way with a minimum of effort.

Several design changes were also planned for below deck, including a slightly raised floor to give Gibbs more room to maneuver his wheelchair, moving the "head" from the aft to the stern, and enlarging the bunk.

"The modifications are not radical," Wahle said. "And they won't affect the look, performance or the resale-ability of the boat."

For Gibbs, the boat represents freedom.

"One place that I don't feel like I'm limited is in the water," Gibbs said. "I feel completely free in the water."

He remembers the joy he felt the first time he went out on a modified paddleboard built by Ward Koffe at M-10 surfboards in Santa Cruz.

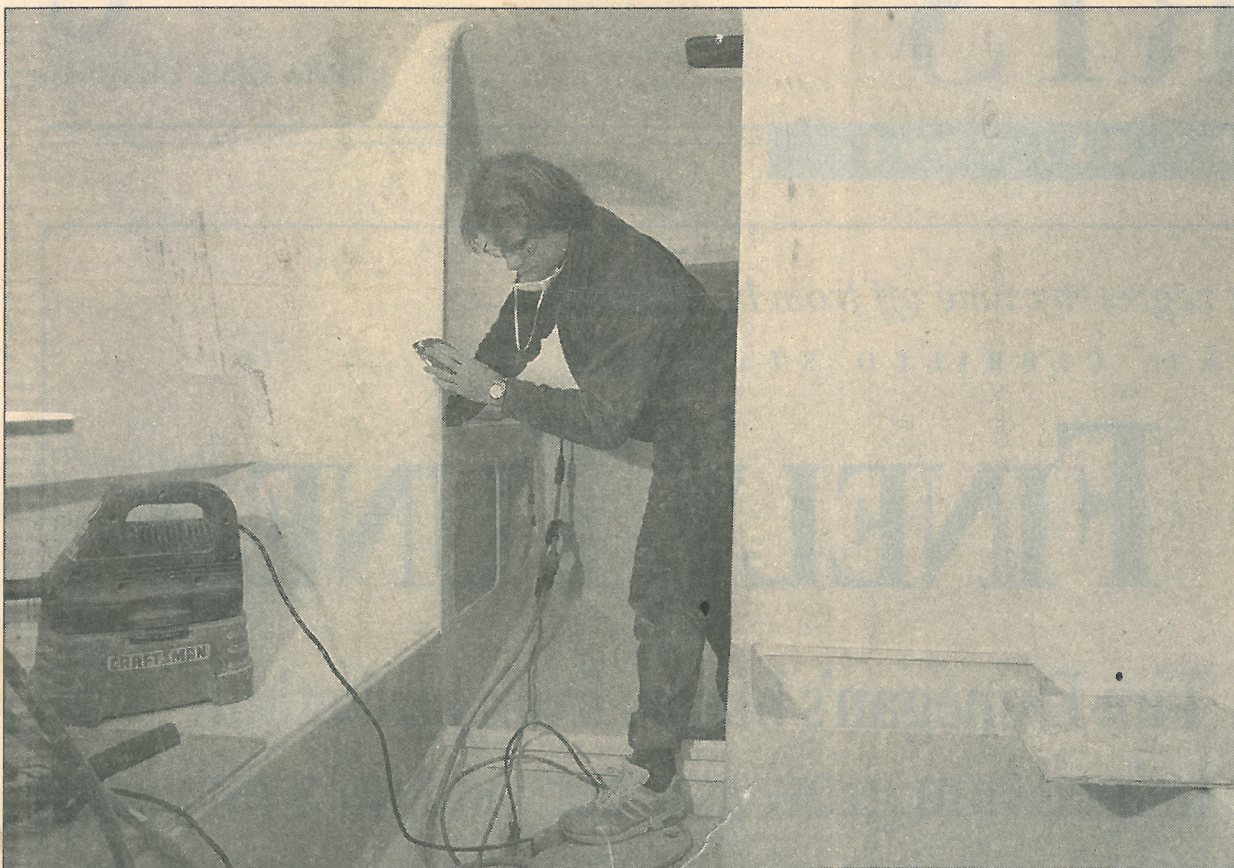
"I used to surf; I wasn't that good but I liked it," Gibbs said. "The first time I went out my paddleboard, I got that feeling again."

Gibbs anticipates the sailboat will improve his life exponentially.

And of course, the boat includes special racks designed to hold two paddleboards.

Gibbs credits Wahle and Wylie with having the patience and understanding to work with him on the project.

"Wylie designs race boats," Gibbs said. "And Wahle is a great sailor. They put their heads together to build me a Porsche that you can camp in. They are my dream makers."



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos