

Steady on one wheel

You do not have to be a clown to ride the unicycle, but you can perform tricks and go for endurance rides



Nicholas Yong

What do clowns, circus entertainers and about 100 people in Singapore have in common?

Answer: They all ride the unicycle.

They are the Singapore Unicyclists, the people who can do things on one wheel that most of us would struggle to do on two.

"To someone who has never taken a ride on a unicycle before, the typical impression would be a clown act or circus trick. I frequently hear people hum the circus tune when they see me riding past," says 27-year-old engineer Chua Kai Lun.

The Unicyclists have been spotted in Orchard Road, the Singapore River and Bukit Timah Nature Reserve. They have also ventured out to Sentosa, Pulau Ubin and even overseas.

Some took part in the recent Asia-Pacific Unicycle Competition in Hong Kong, which attracted about 60 competitors from five nations.

It is a serious pursuit for 27-year-old IT consultant Kee Xuyuan. Last year, he and two other Singaporeans completed a five-day, 800km relay race across Nova Scotia, Canada.

The people he meets while cycling around often look "puzzled" or just get out of the way.

"I think they're afraid that we might hit them or fall on them," he says.

Unicycling took off here in 2002 with the first unofficial gathering of enthusiasts at the Youth Park organised by, perhaps fittingly, a professional entertainer.

British expatriate Ben Matthews, 38, now based in Hong Kong, has been unicycling since 1991 and incorporated it into his act. He had always wanted to start a club here but "there were never any other unicyclists".

A chance meeting with two other expat unicyclists, including Singapore Polytech-

nic senior lecturer Jolyon Caplin, 49, sparked the flame again.

They arranged informal gatherings at the Youth Park, where "we discovered a lot of closet unicyclists", says Mr Caplin.

This led to the start of a polytechnic unicycling club, as well as weekly sessions of unicycle hockey on campus.

Yes, hockey played on unicycles, with rules similar to those of inline hockey.

As housewife Ong Hui Fang, 31, who was present at the first meeting in 2002, puts it: "If you just unicycle round and round, it gets very boring, so you need to find something to do."

Regulars now meet in Bedok every week for unicycle hockey sessions. One of them is Mr Chua, who owns four unicycles - one for long-distance riding, one for off-road riding and another two for hockey and stunts.

The size of the wheel and length of the crank determine your speed and control, hence the need for different unicycles for different activities.

Mr Chua, who taught himself how to ride in 2002, says: "It's technically very challenging. The tricks that can be done are unlimited and the thrill is in finding new tricks to do."

He is one of four freelance trainers at Team-Uni, a Web-based company that sells unicycles, which also teaches people how to ride. Its slogan: Save a wheel.

Ms Cai Jiahui, 25, Team-Uni's business manager, hopes the sport will be as popular as rollerblading.

"Unicycles don't take up much space. We've now got great park connectors that are too restrictive for road cycling, but which are good for endurance rides on unicycles. There are also parks in our neighbourhoods to try out new tricks," she adds.

Team-Uni runs workshops on a daily, weekly or monthly basis. Each participant pays \$50 for two to three hours of instruction, with equipment provided.

Team-Uni has so far trained at least 60 people, at both paid and free sessions. It has been running workshops at Hwa Chong Institution every two years since 2005. At this year's workshop in October, 27 junior college students turned up.

Other schools such as Jurong Primary, where workshops have also been held, hope to organise more of these in future.

Over at Singapore Polytechnic, Mr Caplin is working to get the unicycling club started again, as it is now "pretty dormant".



Fighting for the ball during a game of unicycle hockey are (from left) 10-year-old Jonathan Yow, Maxim Lee, Chua Kai Lun and Cai Jiahui.

He hopes to begin a staff club and has started his small children on unicycles.

Between 60 and 70 unicycles are sold each year by Ghee Hin Chan and Co, the main importer and distributor of unicycles here. The unicycles, imported from Taiwan and Germany, range from \$120 to more than \$200.

Manager Jimmy Ng says his customers include Singaporeans and expatriates, with Japanese students particularly enthusiastic.

The passion for the sport continues to burn bright wherever the unicyclists have gone.

Ms Ong, who now lives in Wellington, New Zealand, has found similar enthusiasts in her neighbourhood.

For her, the sport has added meaning - she met her husband, who is French, during the unicycling sessions in Singapore.

She is looking forward to meeting her Singaporean counterparts again at the World Unicycling Championships, which will be held in Wellington in December.

Mr Matthews gets in a hockey session and a 10km ride every week in Hong Kong and continues to use the unicycle in his act.

Nevertheless, it is often a case of reassuring people he encounters who do not know much about the sport.

"Sometimes you see someone who is really nervous. It's best to yawn nonchalantly as I ride past. That way, they realise I am totally in control and they don't need to freak out," he says.

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"It's not like a bicycle where you can coast along. You need to pedal constantly in order to keep moving."

Mr Kee Xuyuan, on unicycling being physically demanding

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MR BEN MATTHEWS, a British expatriate now based in Hong Kong

Uneasy rider

Reporter Nicholas Yong tries out the unicycle



I came, I saw and I fell. And then I fell again. And again. And again.

That is the basic summary of what happened when I joined some of the Singapore Unicyclists for their weekly hockey session at Bedok South Avenue 3. They had very kindly agreed to give some pointers on how to ride a unicycle.

As I quickly found out though, unicycling is no easy sport to pick up. It takes about a week of continuous practice to get the hang of it, though some can ride in a straight line within hours.

Unicyclist Kee Xuyuan told me some people are naturally good at it and can pick it up immediately. Obviously, I am not one of them.

Having cycled for many years, I had assumed that the same principles of balance and motion would be at work. While that is generally true, unicycling is a whole different ball game.

Step 1: Get on the unicycle. With your hand on the wall for support and your stronger foot on the pedal facing you, you hop onto the seat. This took several attempts but was relatively straightforward.

Step 2: Get comfortable in the seat. While this may sound simple enough, the temptation is often to put your weight on your legs. This makes it difficult to balance and puts a lot of strain on the legs. As Cai Jiahui sagely advised me: "Your weight must be on your butt." Easier said than done, as I kept putting my weight on my legs instead, which were starting to feel the strain.

Step 3: While still hanging onto the wall, stretch out your arms and do small rocking motions back and forth. This is to help you get the hang of it, so you can eventually learn to balance on the unicycle.

However, I managed only a quarter-revolution of the wheel each time before I fell off. Repeatedly. Fortunately, I landed on my feet each time.

"It's always like that at the beginning," Xuyuan assured me. Watching 10-year-old Jonathan Yow ride in circles around the court made me feel inadequate, though.

I was starting to sweat profusely with the effort, too, though this probably had more to do with the heat of the floodlights around the court.

Step 4: Move a half-revolution of the wheel forward. Unfortunately, I never got that far as the falls got in the way. After almost an hour of trying, I decided to leave it to the experts and watch them at play instead.

Chua Kai Lun was particularly impressive, pivoting and swivelling around the court faster on one wheel than I can on two feet - all the while dribbling a tennis ball with a hockey stick. Ask the unicyclists and they will tell you that it takes time and no small amount of effort to get that good.

Xuyuan noted that unicycling is more physically demanding: "It's not like a bicycle where you can coast along. You need to pedal constantly in order to keep moving, even when you are going downhill."

As the hockey session wound down, Jiahui said: "You're always welcome to join us again."

I'll need to get used to falling down first, though.

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