



Clowning around?

Kicking off a new series looking at the rich diversity in cycles, cycling and cyclists, **Mike Penton** explains why he loves unicycling

‘Where’s your other wheel?’ has so many replies.

‘Stolen’ is the simplest, but if I’m asked by a serious-looking cyclist then the only retort can be: ‘I took the training wheel off!’ Most people are drawn to unicycling for the challenge or to be different. I was drawn to it as a fun way to get fit and lose a little weight but I found it so compelling that I now publish a magazine on the sport.

Sport? Well, more like sports. As with two wheels, there are many branches: mountain unicycling (as seen at the Mountain Mayhem 24 hour race) is done on a 24", 26", 29" or even 36" wheel depending on the terrain, which could be Mount Snowdon, Richmond Park or the toughest of technical forest mountain bike trails.

Freestyle is akin to figure skating, with artistic manoeuvres on a 20" unicycle on stage or in a gym. Trials riders, meanwhile, use fat 19" wheels to hop up over four feet high, drop down up to 14 feet and ride skinny railings. The same sort of unicycle is used for street riding, which uses similar urban obstacles as trials while applying freestyle tricks to them.

Unicycle hockey and basketball are great fun and are the best way to improve your skills as you’re concentrating on the game and not your riding. Unicycles are used for commuting and distance riding too. Distance? Oh, yes. In September 2009, Roger Davies and Sam Wakeling rode Land’s End to John O’Groats in 6 1/2 days.

What puts most people off trying a unicycle is fear of falling. And yes, you will fall. Many times. After all, simply to ride one is to continually avoid falling. The difference between falling on a unicycle and a bike is that you will always fall on your feet and there is very little to get tangled up in, as the unicycle will fall away from under you – the very reason it is hard to learn in the first place!

While learning you are moving at walking pace so most people find that they don’t get hurt until they start riding off-road or over



Mike mountain unicycling on Swinley Forest singletrack

What puts people off trying a unicycle is fear of falling. And yes, you will fall – but onto your feet

small obstacles such as kerbs. To reach the stage of being able to mount without support and then ride for 50 metres (the accepted standard for being able to ride) typically takes 10 to 15 hours of perseverance over a couple of weeks, with the regular satisfaction of achieving small incremental targets along the way. It’s satisfying to master, and research has demonstrated that unicycling improves concentration, balance, core strength and motor skills.

The biggest downside is riding downhill. You have to pedal, applying back-pressure to avoid going faster than you pedal. Some riders even fit a brake. However, if you’re on a mass cycle ride you may find unicyclists overtaking you up hills. Our gears are our wheel size, as in the early days of cycling, and our crank length – long (up to 150mm) for control and short (down to 90mm) for speed.

As for getting started, there are cheap options such as eBay and the lone old Raleigh lurking in a dusty corner of your local bike shop. These might put you off with their low quality and uncomfortable

saddles. On the other hand, they could be just enough to get you hooked and start your collection growing as your horizons widen!

There is only one reliable source of quality unicycles in the UK, and that is Unicycle.com. Even a top off-the-peg unicycle can cost under £500, nothing compared to top bikes and still eligible for the Cycle to Work scheme.

If you see a unicyclist ride past, often they will happily stop and let you have a go. Or check out www.unicycle.org.uk and arrange to meet someone or a group to try something specific. Unicyclists are generally very friendly and have rarely escaped from the circus.

Mike Penton is the editor of Uni – The Unicycle Magazine, www.unicyclemagazine.com