



Extreme Unicycling

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Since graduating from the UNSW Co-op Program in January 2011, Milton Lim is currently an actuarial analyst at Taylor Fry Consulting Actuaries. He also enjoys juggling and running. Please feel free to contact him if you are already an unicyclist or are aspiring to learn. The upcoming Unicycle Nationals will be hosted by the Sydney Northern Beaches Unicycle Club over the Labour Day long weekend over 3rd to 6th October 2014 so keep your eyes out!

Main photo: Canadian Kris Holm;
inset: author negotiating a see-saw.

WHY UNICYCLE?

"How can you ride on only one wheel?" I'm often asked. Well, the 'trick' is to always keep moving into the direction in which you're falling, just as the 'trick' to overcoming many of life's obstacles is to turn them into opportunities.

Three years ago, I set out to tackle the challenge of learning to ride a unicycle after seeing a street performer ride a 3.6 metre high giraffe unicycle. What initially appeared to be impossible actually only took about 15 hours of good old fashioned perseverance.

The simple idea of a single wheel with unlimited possibilities provided me with the ideal combination of balance, agility and freedom of gliding on only one wheel. The sport has evolved past its clichéd circus origins to become incredibly diverse and awe-inspiring. For example, there are at least 20 different ways of mounting (getting on a unicycle), including the aptly named *suicide mount*.

UNICYCLING CHAMPIONSHIPS

The Australian Unicycle Nationals (UniNats) and Asia Pacific Unicycle Championships (APUC) were recently held in Canberra from 12 – 16th December 2013 with unicyclists from all across Australia, NZ and even a handful of competitors from around the world.

A variety of competitions were held including:

- Tournaments for **hockey** and **basketball** teams (played on unicycles)



L to R: Unicycle high-jump; Unicycle trials course; Jamey Mossengren on a 12' giraffe unicycle; 10km charity race start, with Samuel Johnson in pink (middle); Bottom: unicycle hockey.

- **Track and field** events with quirky variations e.g. riding one-footed, backwards, while juggling, long jump and high jump (yes, all while on the unicycle!)
- **Freestyle** performances (similar to ice skating)
- **Street** (similar to skateboarding / BMX) and trials (negotiating obstacles)
- **Mountain unicycling (muni)** in Mount Stromlo Forest Park, which really pushed my riding to its limits with a few unexpected drops onto the steep rocky terrain.

A particular highlight was the charity gala dinner attended by Samuel Johnson (an Australian actor who starred in *The Secret Life of Us* and the ACT Chief Minister Katy Gallagher. Samuel had ridden a record-breaking 16,000 km on his unicycle all across Australia over the past year and raised over \$1.3 million for cancer research, inspired by his courageous sister Connie who had suffered and recovered from breast cancer on several occasions.

Although some of the events were fiercely contested, the entire unicycling community from ages 5 to 75 was incredibly supportive of everyone's achievements. For many, simply participating and finishing an event was an achievement in itself, such as completing the 10km timed race for myself with little preparation and handicapped with a much smaller 20-inch wheel. Being young at heart, we also enjoyed playing games of dodge ball, bull rush and gladiators with the aim of staying upright on our unicycles whilst pushing others off (or using whatever devious means necessary) to win as the last man standing.

THE CONTROL CYCLE FOR BALANCING ON A UNICYCLE

It is a common misconception that the gyroscopic forces of the rotating wheels are responsible for stabilising both bicycles and unicycles, but they have actually been shown to be negligible. The key to staying upright is to always keep the unicycle underneath your centre of gravity.

Beginners should not be disheartened by the fact that they might fall off the first 100 or more times as they're simply learning 100 ways of how not to ride a unicycle. Eventually, when the feedback loop of the brain sensing balance and the body's response to adjust its position becomes quicker than the acceleration of gravity, the learner becomes a rider!

Giraffe unicycles, which can be several meters high, are actually easier to balance on since they fall slower with the same angular

momentum (similar principle to how a broomstick is easier to balance on your hand than a pencil).

If mastering a single wheel wasn't difficult enough, some more exotic variations of the unicycle include:

- **Tandem unicycle:** two riders on just one wheel
- **Multiwheeled unicycle:** several wheels stacked on top of each other, but with only one wheel in contact with the ground
- **Ultimate wheel:** unicycle with no frame or seat, but just the wheel and pedals, hence needs to be ridden whilst standing
- **Impossible wheel:** just the wheel without cranks or pedals, hence there's no 'pedalling' required – just coasting on pure balance and hoping for the best!
- **Self-balancing unicycle:** with a computerised motor for those wishing to outsource their balancing skills

THE FINE LINE BETWEEN BRAVERY AND RECKLESSNESS

Many daredevils (or rather 'experienced risk assessors') have pushed the boundaries by riding unicycles: down active volcanoes, down the Eiffel Tower, hopping up the Eiffel Tower, on tightropes, on the handrails of bridges and even along the Great Wall of China (right on the very edge). Although it may appear dangerous to the uninitiated, some styles like mountain unicycling are actually safer than biking because of the lack of handlebars, better manoeuvrability and typically lower speeds.

Unicycling can open up your eyes to see the world in a different way and inspire you to imagine "Can a unicycle be ridden on that obstacle?" It is remarkable that such creative athleticism can lead people to achieve so much more with so much less.

For those interested, many jaw-dropping videos can be found online by searching for 'unicycle' or 'Kris Holm' (a major pioneer of the sport) on YouTube. **A**

