

Doug Moe: Family having fun on one wheel



JANUARY 20, 2010 6:00 PM • [BY DOUG MOE | DMOE@MADISON.COM | 608-252-6446](#)

It's funny about connections and how things work out.

If Ann O'Brien hadn't been a ballet dancer more than two decades ago, before her son Scott Wilton was born, Scott might never have been riding a unicycle around a waterfront course in New Zealand earlier this month with a chance of becoming a world champion.

Scott, 17, is a junior at Madison East High School. Some years ago, his mother was looking for a different kind of Christmas gift for Scott and his sister, Patricia Wilton, who today is a sophomore at East. O'Brien had been a dancer with Ballet Austin in Texas, and she'd been impressed with one of the other dancers who rode a unicycle to practice every day. It enhanced his balance and posture and O'Brien made a mental note. Someday she would get a unicycle.

Someday arrived half a dozen Christmases ago when O'Brien and her husband, local dentist Jeff

Wilton, were trying to find gifts for Scott and Patricia that weren't video games or otherwise electronic. They chose a Bongo Board and a unicycle.

The unicycle was such a hit that it sat in a corner for a year.

But then a family friend urged Scott to participate in the annual Madfest Juggling Extravaganza, which includes unicycle riding. It was challenging and fun, and Scott was hooked. The next year, Patricia got involved.

Now it's a family thing. Jeff rides a unicycle to work every day, and Ann, well, she's trying. Learning, she said Wednesday with a grin, "requires a lot of patience."

But it has become something of a way of life for the family, and it has been their ticket to see the world. Unicycle competitions have taken them to Nova Scotia, Denmark, and, most recently, New Zealand.

It was in Wellington on Jan. 4, during the 10 kilometer portion of the Unicycle World

Championships, that Scott found himself rounding the final corner of a hotly contested race with a chance to win — and become, at 17, a world champion.

It was Scott, a few years ago, who discovered the unicycle could be more than a hobby, that there were competitions. He'd been riding the unicycle to school, getting better and going faster, when he learned the 2007 North American Unicycling Championships were going to be held outside of Ann Arbor.

His mother drove him to the event and Scott won the overall points championship for the 14-and-under age group.

At the Michigan competition, Scott met a brother and sister from Toronto who invited him to join them in a team competition the following summer in Canada. A few months later, the entire family went to Denmark, where Scott competed in the world championships in Copenhagen.

The latest adventure began with a flight to New Zealand in mid-December for the world championships, which are held every two years. Both Scott and Patricia were competing.

There was sightseeing first — the family hiked the stunning Milford Track on New Zealand's South Island — and then several days of competition.

The 10 kilometer competition was scheduled for Jan. 3, Scott Wilton's 17th birthday. But howling winds along Wellington's waterfront caused it to be delayed one day.

The course was set up with numerous tight turns — 35 in each of three laps — but it all came down to the last 90 degree turn, some 20 yards from the finish.

Wilton was just behind Corbin Dunn, a fellow American.

"Corbin slowed a little at the turn," Wilton recalled Wednesday. "I pulled wide and nosed ahead of him."

He crossed the finish line a world champion. "A great feeling," he said. Wilton was the youngest of the top 10 finishers.

What's next? Scott and his family are active in a local club, Madison Unicyclists, which meets alternate Sunday afternoons at the Goodman Center. He's looking at colleges, hoping to find one where the locals share his passion for the unicycle.

And then there's the next world championships, announced while they were in New Zealand. The 2012 event will be in the Italian Alps.

"Mostly, it's fun," Ann said. "Once you watch people do it, you wonder why everyone doesn't ride a unicycle."

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