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Meet the unicycling kids of east Madison

One wheel's enough

by Lynn Welch

on Friday 06/05/2009

People often stare when they spot Isaiah Stefan riding home from school. The sixth-grader at O'Keeffe Middle School commutes perched on his 36-inch-wheel unicycle.

"It's unique and fun to do," says Stefan, 12, of riding his unicycle. "And not too many people know how to do it."

Stefan is part of an informal but active troupe of unicyclists in Madison who get together to promote the activity and practice their skills. Some in the growing group compete and perform, too. The Madison Unicyclists — they sometimes perform under the name the Wheeling Dervishes — have grown from about five people, who first performed at the Celebrating Youth festival in 2006, to about 25 riders currently.

This summer, many of them will compete in the North American Unicycling Convention & Championships, or NAUCC 09, in Minneapolis. The six-day competition includes a wide variety of events: mountain unicycling (or muni), standard skills, high- and long-jump, races including a 10K ride, street or flatland trials, and a unicycle marathon (for a full list, go to naucc09.com). It's a first for most of the Madison riders, many of whom took up the activity because, like Stefan, they found it fun and interesting.

Many in the Madison Unicyclists group got started after seeing a sibling, friend or neighbor ride a unicycle. "My brothers were doing this before me," says Delia Ross, a ninth-grader at East High School. "It took me a few weeks of continual practice. It's challenging, but it's fun."

Stefan says he has recruited about 10 people to the sport, including his brother Will. Members of the group range from second graders to adults. Many parents have learned to ride after seeing their kids master the skill.

Scott Wilton, a 10th-grader at East, was introduced to the sport by his parents. Six years ago, Ann O'Brien wrapped a unicycle as a Christmas gift for her active son and daughter, Patricia. "It's great for kids who need a high level of physical activity. You have to be fully engaged to stay on a unicycle, and you can take [the activity] as far as you want," says O'Brien.

Both kids eventually learned, and Scott, now 16, advanced rapidly to compete in national and international unicycling events, winning some 16 medals last year at the national competition. Last summer, he also rode on a team for the Ride the Lobster long-distance relay race across Nova Scotia.

Other unicyclists, like ninth-grader Patricia Wilton, focus on the artistic elements of unicycling. Think of the grace and precision of figure skating, only on a unicycle.

Yet others find the spectacle of unicycling a perfect performance platform. Kylen McClintock, 16, and his sister Liana, 13, are accomplished at juggling while riding, taught by their dad, Tom, and uncle, Dave. "It's his specialty," explains their mom, Kelly Kearns. "Other people are good at other things, some are the fastest or jump the highest, and Kylen is the best at juggling on the unicycle."

The unicyclists have become a regular addition to Madison's annual winter juggling festival, MadFest, performing a skills showcase each year and setting up games of unicycle hockey.

Other local venues where the unicyclists regularly perform include Orton Park Fest and the Willy Street Fair. (See maduni.com to find out where you can see them this summer or to join.)

Continued innovation in riding and equipment has expanded the sport, says NAUCC organizer Mel Zeller. Additions to the sport in recent years, like mountain unicycling and street-style riding — which involves performing jumps and grinds as you would ordinarily see on a skateboard — have drawn younger, more active riders to unicycling. This style of riding gets promoted virally through online videos of the extreme skills.

"Anything you can do on a skateboard or a bike, we break ground and say, why can't you do it on a unicycle?" says Zeller.

But Wendy Grzych, president of the Unicycling Society of America, believes that it's really families that have helped the activity grow so fast.

"Unicycling has evolved to include more families, rather than just young, teenage riders. And riders can start younger now than in the '70s," Grzych says. "I learned to ride when I was 9. Both my children learned to ride when they were 5. Back then, you had to wait until your legs were long enough to reach the pedals of a 20-inch standard unicycle, 7 or 8 if you were lucky. Now unicycles with 12-inch wheels can fit children who have not yet attended preschool."

Unicycling is inexpensive, has many great health benefits and is accessible to anyone, Zeller says. "It's unusual. Not everyone chooses to do it, but anyone can do it. It takes a number of falls."

Unicycling is safe, according to enthusiasts. No one in the Madison unicycle group has suffered broken bones or other serious injury from unicycling.

Jeff Wilton, Scott and Patricia's dad and now a unicyclist himself, agrees that anyone who wants to commit can learn to ride a unicycle in about 20 hours. An athletic kid will find it easier and be able to master it quicker, he adds.

Grzych says the first national unicycling meet was held in 1971 in New York City. Over the years, these annual competitions have evolved to include a growing number of unicyclists and their varying riding skills. The national group (unicyclingusa.org) now has 800 members and 17 affiliated clubs across the country, with many others clubs not officially affiliated.

Locally, Budget Bicycle Center owner Roger Charly says he has seen demand for unicycles of all kinds increase in the past several years. His store sells 40 to 50 unicycles a year.

"I saw two college students recently racing down the sidewalk in front of the store and having a lot of fun," recalls Charly. "I thought, 'Wow, you wouldn't have seen that a couple years ago.'"