

So much more than one wheel



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Forget soccer. Ann O'Brien of Madison is proud to be a unicycle mom.

Her kids, Scott Wilton, 18, and Patricia Wilton, 17, are one-wheel wonders, so it's only natural that O'Brien, president of Madison Unicyclists, worked to bring the North American Unicycle Convention & Championships to Madison.

The convention gets rolling on Saturday with a parade starting at 1 p.m. at the Goodman

Community Center, 149 Waubesa St., and pedaling to Yahara Place Park in time for a 2 p.m. criterium race. Events for the week include mountain unicycling, unicycle hockey and basketball, artistic competitions, a 10K race and a marathon.

Judging from the complexity of the weeklong schedule (visit uninationals.com for a full listing of such events as high jump, freestyle pairs and track racing), unicycling is shedding its comedic image.

"Unicycling is often associated with clowns and circuses," said Jenni Mjenzi, a first-grade teacher at Sandburg Elementary School in Madison and a uni enthusiast, "but it's evolved so much it should be an Olympic sport."

O'Brien echoes that sentiment. "(Unicycling) is in the emerging stages of becoming a much bigger sport. Think about where snowboarding was a decade ago; we're moving in that direction," she said.

The sport's popularity comes as no surprise to O'Brien, whose son, Scott, is a world champion unicycle racer.

"It's an engaging activity that requires an integration of all the senses, not just pure athleticism," she said. "You need balance and persistence, skills that can be applied to life."

Mjenzi recognized the lessons that could be learned from the one-wheeled activity, which led her to pilot a program this past winter at Sandburg in which she taught unicycling to a group of elementary school students.

"It's such a self-esteem builder for the kids," she said. "Learning to ride teaches persistence. Nobody gets it the first time. They learn that they have to stick to it in order to succeed."

O'Brien said that her organization, Madison Unicyclists, would like to continue working with programs like the one Mjenzi implemented in order to spread the word about unicycling.

"There's so much pride involved, and cooperation. Kids learn that they have to hold each other up to be successful," O'Brien said.

Speaking of collaboration, O'Brien said that her unicycling skills have improved since her kids have gotten so involved in the sport, "but I can only do it if one of them rides next to me and holds my pinky."

Mjenzi said she hopes the weeklong convention, which is the largest gathering of unicycle enthusiasts in North America, raises the profile of the sport in Madison and inspires people to give it a whirl.

"One thing I tell students is that learning to ride a unicycle is 90 percent mental and 10 percent physical. If you think you can ride a unicycle, you're right. If you think you can't ride a unicycle, you're right," she said. "It's a brain game. And you don't have to be a kid to learn to ride, you can learn as an adult - it's all about motivation."

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