

Appeal of the wheel: Madison is in the midst of a unicycle boom

Steven Elbow | The Capital Times
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Kids ride their unicycles on Yahara Parkway bike path to O'Keeffe Middle School.

Mike DeVries — The Capital Times

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If you happen to be on the Yahara River bike path on Madison's east side on any given school day you'll see lots of kids biking to Marquette Elementary and O'Keeffe Middle schools. But when a certain group glides by, you might notice that there's something missing.

Keep looking and it hits you: Each kid is missing a wheel. Helmeted, defying gravity

with their overstuffed backpacks, these kids chug along effortlessly on one wheel, then lock their unicycles to the same racks as their two-wheeled friends, who long ago stopped giving them a second look.

The kids ride unicycles to school from the Tenney-Lapham neighborhood about a mile away. The neighborhood is the nucleus of a unicycling movement that's putting Madison on the map for its growing number of enthusiasts. Within just a two-block radius in the prosperous lakeside enclave, some 40 kids and parents have taken up riding the one-wheeled gizmos with a passion that's spilling into other neighborhoods, schools and a local neighborhood center.

Kids teach each other to ride and perform tricks, proving that they can become fixated on something other than video games and social media.

The neighborhood has even produced world-class unicycle competitors.

Feeding the fanaticism, the Madison Unicyclists club, or **MadUnis**, is set to host the North American Unicycling Competition and Convention **in 2015** and is already lining up venues for the 45 or so events, some of which will take place at Tenney Park. The club hosted the 2011 event as well.

There are about 80 members of the MadUnis, but the number of riders far exceeds that. Yet the city's embrace of the unicycle remains largely under the radar.

"I think that's kind of the Madison story," says Judy Frankel, spokeswoman for the Madison Area Sports Commission, which is providing support for the 2015 nationals. "We're big in a lot of things that maybe people don't realize."

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When local unicyclist Scott Wilton this year won the 10k and the marathon at the international unicycle convention, or UniCon, setting world records in both, it got no mention in the local media. Likewise when his sister, Patricia Wilton, won the U.S. marathon in 2013 and the 10K this year.



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Maybe the country's not yet ready to elevate the Wiltons to the level of Olympian siblings Eric and Beth Heiden, the local 1970s and '80s speed skating icons. But some unicyclists hope to someday get their sport in the Olympics.

"It should definitely be an Olympic sport with all the new tricks and stuff," says Martin Panofsky, 13, an ace trick unicyclist who has even invented his own move, the Martin Roll.

Sure, you might scoff, unable to shake the image of clowns juggling on unicycles. But no one who's seen **Kaori Matsuzawa** perform, or who has witnessed **Japan's group freestyle** team can deny that beautiful things can happen on one wheel. Watching street unicyclist world champion **Julia Belk**, you'll see that extreme skateboarders – who are **making a bid** for the 2020 games – have nothing on her.

"I think honestly, one of the biggest goals of most people riding is to see it as a sport and not a circus thing," Scott Wilton says.

Scott, 21, and Patricia, 20, with their mother, Ann O'Brien, are responsible for much of the unicycle craze that's sweeping the city. But although O'Brien, president of Madison Unicyclists, can't hide her pride in her kids, she downplays the competitive aspects of the sport.

“We were much more interested in the educational and youth development aspects of it,” she says.

I should mention here that my daughter, Marion, is a MadUni member. While most of her friends have been riding for two years or more, she took it up a year ago, pedaling across the gym after attending about six or seven afterschool sessions. It was hard work, but more advanced riders helped her along, gliding alongside, holding her hand as she found her center of gravity. When she first managed to ride solo, she was elated and eager to acquire new skills. She’s not as accomplished as many of her friends, but she’s comfortable practicing with them and riding to school.

No matter how good she and her friends get, the fun of just being able to ride the thing never seems to get stale.

“It took me a couple of months to learn, but it was worth it,” says 11-year-old Maria Matyka. “It’s amazing.”

While the afterschool programs have unicycles that kids can use for free, most veteran riders at O’Keeffe and Marquette own their own. It’s relatively inexpensive. While some local bike shops carry them, we found that prices are significantly better online. We found a 20-inch Torker for about \$100, but soon found that the seat was too small and had to shell out another \$40 to upgrade. While the 20-inch wheel is the preferred size for getting started and for freestyle, many kids get a faster 24-inch for getting around. We found a Club 24-inch for \$140.

But the pastime gets more expensive when you get into serious riding, like flatland, street or “muni” — mountain unicycle — which require more durable frames and fatter wheels and cost \$350 or more. For distance riding, unicyclists often use a 36-inch wheel, which can run as high as \$1,000. For competitive riders, like Wilton, specialized features like Swiss-made 2-speed hubs can push the price even higher.

As its popularity grows, unicycling is more and more becoming an activity for all

ages, and several parents are getting bitten by the unicycle bug. But they seldom pick it up as fast as the kids. I have nothing to show for my three or so attempts but several bruises to my shins inflicted by the pedals.

But in promoting unicycling, parents' enthusiasm has been boundless.

O'Brien and another unicyclist parent, Randy Stefan, organized the 2011 championship as a way to plant the phenomenon firmly into the city's sport culture.

"I knew that if we committed to that it would force us to be organized," O'Brien says. "So we opened up a checking account and were incorporated."

It worked. The event drew some 300 participants, and the entry fees allowed the group to set up a capital fund to buy unicycles.

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These days, at the field house at Marquette/O'Keeffe after school on Fridays, kids of various abilities cruise the gym floor, some practicing stunts on raised platforms, others practicing tricks like wheel-walking, bouncing or riding backwards, and others just trying to ride in a straight line.





Unicyclist Scott Wilton rides his unicycle on path at Tenney Park.

Mike DeVries

“We started three years ago with eight,” says Jill Cohan, a computer resource teacher who started the club. “Now 30 or 40 show up.”

The more advanced riders get to practice their skills to advance up the skill levels, of which there are 10. Only a handful of riders worldwide have reached the highest level, but many of the riders work hard to move up. For instance, Martin is a Level 7, and Patricia Wilton is a Level 8.

But there are some rules, which Cohan says helps kids develop cooperation and leadership skills.

“They really are obligated to help the newer kids ride,” she says. “And they understand that their payoff is that free time between 4 and 5 when they get the whole gym and can really concentrate on developing their specific crazy skills.”

The afterschool program first got off the ground four years ago at Sandburg Elementary, spearheaded by first-grade teacher Jenni Wolfe, who learned to unicycle growing up in Houston. Wolfe started a unicycle program while teaching in California in the early 1990s. In 1998, she helped organize the national unicycle convention, now known as the North American Unicycle Competition and Convention, NAUCC, in Monrovia, Calif.

“When I came to Madison I hooked up with the Madison Unicyclists and they graciously donated unicycles,” she says. “That’s the biggest hurdle, getting the equipment.”

Starting the club at Sandburg opened up unicycling to a new group of kids who wouldn’t otherwise have had the opportunity. While the center of the Madison

unicycle movement is in well-to-do Tenney-Lapham, about two-thirds of Wolfe's 18 unicyclists are low-income. Kids who can't afford their own unicycle can have their parents sign an agreement to borrow one.

Wolfe said the program teaches kids how to achieve, because advancement is not easy.

"I connect the dots for them," she says. "I say that this is a life skill that you're learning, because nobody gets unicycling the first time – nobody. You have to have grit, determination and tenacity."

It also has a payoff in school. There are times, Wolfe says, that kids are more motivated to go to unicycle club than to do school work. She lets them know that school comes first.

"I'll tell them, 'It looks like you can't come today because you're not turning in your work. And I need you to be on-task at school as well as in unicycling, so can you pull it together?'" she says. "So I can use it as incentive."

Around the same time Cohan was establishing the Marquette/O'Keeffe program, fifth-grade teacher Phillip Edmonds was organizing one at Shorewood Elementary on the city's west side.

"I'm not that great at it," says Edmonds, a Neenah native who started riding at age 12 on a friend's unicycle. Then he let the talent lay dormant for 30 years.

"It's just that I think it's one of the coolest and funnest things you could ever do," he says. "So starting the club for me was about sharing that."

Edmonds says the program is so popular that he's having trouble finding the space to handle it. Last year about 30 kids signed up.





A unicycle is parked among bicycles at O'Keeffe Middle School.

Mike DeVries

“It’s kind of a scattered, frantic club because we have so many,” he says.

Edmonds started the club without the help of MadUnis. Then he showed up at a scheduled practice at the Goodman Center and connected with the group, which eventually supplied five unicycles to add to the four that Edmonds bought. The rest of the kids have their own.

Many of the kids are from Eagle Heights, UW-Madison’s graduate student housing complex, where many families are from overseas.

“We benefit from that, because when they go back they usually donate their unicycle to us because it’s just one more thing to travel with,” he says.

Other kids have moved on to nearby Hamilton Middle School, where there’s a push to start another afterschool club.

O’Brien sees the growth as a natural evolution that starts in the neighborhoods and spills into the schools.

“It has to grow organically,” she says. “There has to be a school champion, somebody who’s willing to say, ‘Yeah, I’ll make this happen.’ Then Madison Unicyclists will buy the unicycles.”

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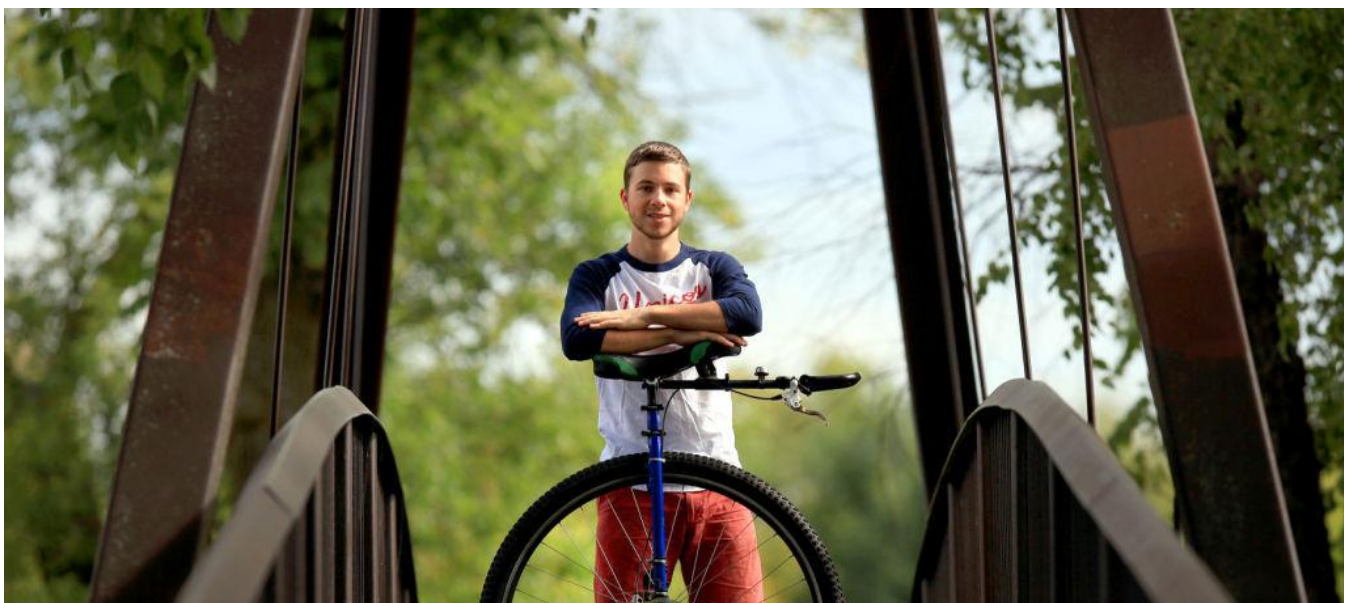
But it will likely take some time for other neighborhoods to catch up to Tenney. Before the Wiltons got involved, other pockets of unicyclists were once spread among Rutledge and Russell streets, North Sherman Avenue and Monona, where parents originally helped organize the MadUnis. But many of the kids in those families have moved on to college or have taken up other interests in high school. Several of their parents continued to serve on the MadUnis board until last year.

Now MadUnis hopes to make unicycling so entrenched in the local scene that kids rotating in will offset the kids rotating out. And the Wiltons seem determined to make that their legacy.

Cohan’s kids, Marin, 11, and Hayden, 14, started riding after Patricia and Scott Wilton, who were their babysitters, bought them unicycles.

Jill Cohan took up the sport and now, with her kids, competes in the nationals.

“Scott and Patricia started it, and then people caught on,” Marin says.





Unicyclist Scott Wilton on iron bridge at Tenney Park in Madison.

Mike DeVries

Kids started teaching siblings and friends, “and it just evolved,” she says.

Patricia Wilton, an elementary education and French student at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, estimates that she’s taught between 20 and 30 kids to ride — in the neighborhood, at the afterschool program and at a summer unicycling camp she started last year.

She’s hoping to apply her studies to developing a curriculum that will establish unicycling as a bona fide school sport, on the level of soccer or basketball.

“Part of our goal is to make these programs sustainable,” she said, “to keep the generations coming.”

Patricia and Scott Wilton are also board members of the Twin Cities Unicycle Club, which with more than 200 members is one of the largest and most established unicycling groups in the nation. They are also board members of the Unicycling Society of America, where Patricia serves as vice president and as the official in charge of certifying testers who assign skill levels to unicyclists.

Scott Wilton, a University of Minnesota math and German student who’s studying for a year in Germany, serves on the international Unicycling Federation.

Both say the sport has benefits beyond learning to ride on one wheel.

“Obviously you have the perseverance from working at it, but there’s also a ton of working together with other riders,” he said. “When you’re starting, at first you have

to have a hand from someone else. You either have to ask for it or that person has to offer their help. At the school programs we really have the kids work on that.”

Just why kids get so passionate about the sport depends on who you ask.

Scott Wilton loves the diversity of the sport, which includes freestyle, flatland and obstacle competitions, as well as racing, hockey and basketball. Wilton’s accomplished at freestyle and distance racing, but his favorite pastime is mountain unicycling, an activity whose popularity is rapidly growing.

Olivia Seibert, 12, is an accomplished freestyler and mountain unicyclist who braves the mile-and-a-half to school on her mountain unicycle through whatever the Wisconsin weather throws her way.

“It’s hard because the snow is sometimes super hard to ride through,” she said. “But it’s definitely fun and definitely good for stamina.”

A stellar student, she also sees it indirectly as an intellectual pursuit.

“According to some studies in Korea, apparently it’s good for intelligence,” she said. “I had to do a paper on it.”

Maria Matyka likes the attention she gets on the bike paths and working at climbing up the skill levels.

“It never gets old,” she said. “You just keep working and working.”

Scott Wilton said that unicycling is much more entrenched in European countries and in Japan, where it has practically been elevated to an art form. But it’s gaining in popularity in the U.S. And communities across the globe are connecting to develop standards and techniques, and share new skills and technologies.

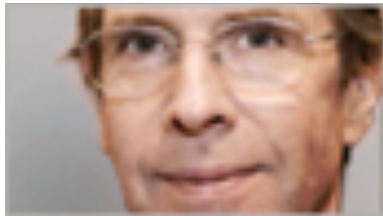
“It’s definitely growing a lot right now,” he said.

But because of the hard work it takes to get started, he doubts it will ever reach the

popularity of other extreme sports like snowboarding or skateboarding.

“You can get on a skateboard and suck at it, but at least you can push down the street,” he said. “That’s always going to be really hard with unicycling. To do it you really have to dedicate the time to get going, and from there you have to dedicate more time if you want to get good – like any other sport.” [OBJ]

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