

# **Unicycling and Identity:**

**Narratives of motivation and  
achievement in young riders**

## **VOLUME TWO**

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the  
University of Liverpool for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by

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June 2009

## Chapter 11



### Marathon Madness - Pete's Story

#### Introduction

#### Sources and Contexts

Pete's story is based on his own unicycling experiences; I have placed it here as it illustrates some aspects of self-identity and self-esteem discussed in the previous chapter. I take as the frame for the story Pete's participation in a marathon race at UNICON, the international unicycle convention and world championships held every two years which I observed him in. UNICON brings him into contact with other unicyclists of many nationalities and I draw on the experience of other unicyclists to a minor degree. Pete was, at the time of interview and observation in the marathon, aged 22. He had been unicycling for seven years, having started at 15, at school. He told me his story during three interviews totaling approximately 90 minutes. The interview was structured as discussed in the Methodology chapter. Two days after the marathon I talked informally with Pete to get his reflections on the race, having given him time to recover from it.

While at UNICON observing Pete in the marathon, I was able to observe a wide variety of unicyclists, of many different nationalities, participating in the full range of disciplines and to have conversations with some of them. This enables me to look more broadly at my key themes and to supplement Pete's narrative, to provide a wider setting in which to recount the actual marathon ride and to present some of the surrounding context and culture of unicycling. Using the frame of an actual event at which I was present as a participant observer, a non-riding member of the UK team, and drawing very closely on Pete's own story as he told it, the narrative presented here does meet the criteria for ethnographic, creative non-fiction used in this study.

Pete was a very articulate and confident interviewee. This greatly helped with data collection concerning his story as he provided clear, detailed examples and incidents from his memory. Having such details has enabled me to construct the story very tightly around his experience for he provided a very rich data source. Despite being very personal to him his experience has many similarities to the other stories in this thesis and to those who took part in the questionnaire, both in the UK and overseas. Common themes and elements will be discussed once all narratives have been presented, in the final section of this thesis, Chapter 16.

At interview Pete described himself as a “well motivated” individual, who, in his view, works suitably hard academically and achieves well. He placed himself one quarter of the way along the motivation continuum from the highly motivated end for both his recent education and his unicycling. I thought Pete to be an interesting study as he is fairly typical of young adults whom I have observed unicycling in terms of his skill and commitment. He describes himself as “good”, rather than excellent, which I think is a fair description. He had been regularly riding, about once a week, but had taken a break to study for exams. Despite very strong, good intentions, at the time of interview, to get back out on the saddle after his exams and train for the marathon race life, by his admission following the event, “got in the way”. However, I would describe him as a regular rider. The discipline at which Pete is most skilled, based on his own evaluation of himself, my observations of him and other riders, is mountain unicycling, Muni. The event around which the narrative is constructed, however, is racing, long-distance racing. This is particularly interesting as it is not his strongest discipline and a marathon course of 26 miles is, by its very length, grueling, a significantly demanding physical feat. What would motivate someone to enter themselves into a sporting event at which they are not particularly strong? Pete had very little experience of distance riding of this length. Of particular interest is the way in which he moves between different disciplines, both at the same time and at different times in his life. This is typical of many unicyclists who pursue more than one

discipline, and is something which is evidenced in data gathered from the questionnaires.

I did not know Pete prior to the interview, although it became apparent that we had attended several of the same UK unicycling events in the past. He was a self-selecting interviewee as he responded to a request I posted on a unicycle forum. He wrote to me, describing himself as lacking in confidence as a young teenager at school.

### **Voice and Authenticity**

The narrative account draws particularly closely on Pete's personal, lived experiences and thoughts as he told them in the interview, perhaps the most closely of any of the case studies, given his clear articulation of these experiences and the detail with which he recounted them to me. It paraphrases many of his own words and chosen phrases from the transcript, often in the order that they occurred and, as such, I am confident that it is a fair, accurate and authentic representation of his story through which his voice can very clearly be heard, as illustrated below. The first extract is Pete's own words from the interview when asked "What is it that *really* motivates you to unicycle?" The second extract is taken directly from the narrative account of his story and shows how close the two extracts are, ensuring his voice is heard.

*I think any sport I was going to get into has to be something that not a lot of people do – like mountain biking which is really appealing to me – just because I like to forge my own way. If I go mountain biking to a mountain biking park there'll be a million guys better than me and there's a fixed idea of what you should be doing; you learn this trick and then that one next. With unicycling you really just have a go, whether it's on the patio and then in the woods 'cause that's the next nearest place to ride. I bought a decent one for off road riding and I really just made my own path.*

*A little bit different it was, you had to be willing to forge your own way, make your own path. There were no set expectations; you could do what you wanted to. If he went mountain biking at a*



*mountain-bike park they'd be a million guys better than him and they'd all have a fixed idea of what they should be doing and expect him to do it to. Unicycling wasn't like that, you just had a go, did the best you could, strived for your own personal best, on the patio at home, in the woods with your mates, wherever you took it.*

I transcribed the interview in its entirety, rather than selected parts of it, due to the clarity and detail with which he spoke. The interview was less tightly structured than some of the others in this study as Pete responded so fully to initial questions from which a two-way dialogue flowed more freely than with some other interviewees. The validity and credibility of the interview is further supported by the fact that I was present at the marathon race which forms the basis of the story and so it is constructed around actual observations rather than imagined events. Pete has read the narrative and confirmed that it is an accurate representation of his experiences.

In reflecting on my influence on the story as the researcher, not being known to each other was neither a help nor a hindrance in my view. He had come to the interview willingly, a confident and articulate young man now, so he had nothing to prove to me or to others. As someone who is genuinely interested in the development of unicycling and enthusiastic about it he was interested in my study and willing to take part for any positive impact it might ultimately have on the sport. Not knowing him prior to the interview I had no preconceived ideas about him or his unicycling which has helped me to ensure objectivity in this case study.

It has been somewhat difficult to write a narrative which ensures anonymity for Pete. This is due to the fact that a relatively small UK team attended UNICON XIV and not all of them participated in the marathon. However I felt that to deconstruct the marathon event and remove it from its UNICON setting, when its context provided such an interesting frame for Pete's story and illustrated his motivation for riding so effectively, would be to lose a very effective illustrative tool. Having said that, if somebody wanted to identify which male member of the UK team Pete is they would have to do some considerable investigative work on the internet to reach the correct conclusion. I explained

this to Pete at interview, when we discussed his participation in UNICON and my idea to observe him there. He was happy with this, his confidence and self-assurance now being very strong. The importance of anonymity has still been given careful consideration and all that is possible has been done to increase anonymity, for example names of people, locations and dates of UNICON events and other settings or instances from Pete's story have all been changed to allow as much anonymity as possible. He is satisfied with the level of anonymity and has approved the narrative.



## Marathon Madness - Pete’s Story

The alarm on his watch beeped far too early as he was roused from a surprisingly deep sleep. The mattress on the classroom floor could have been comfier but perhaps he had got used to it after four nights. Alternatively, it could have been the late night and the few beers which helped him to sleep so well. He’d had a relaxing day yesterday, chilling out on the beach at Christainhavn with some friends and then back to watch the Freestyle Group before having a couple of beers in the bar; now that freestyle had been amazing. That Toyoda club, wow, they were something else! Of course he’d remembered them from two years ago – 29 of them this year, in perfect unison, bloody amazing. They were like ice-skaters, they flowed so effortlessly, in and out of each other, spinning round and round and round, wheel walking together in perfect rows of symmetry. He shook his head just thinking about it. Unbelievable, bloody unbelievable. Whyever he’d slept so soundly, the good night would have set him up well for the ride. He sat up, allowing himself to wake up slowly, and checked his watch: 6.00 a.m. He got up off the mattress, throwing his sleeping bag down on it, and pulled his t-shirt over his head. He stepped quietly around the other sleeping bodies, Sarah from the States, Jan from Holland, a couple from Croatia he hadn’t known and Jack and Spud from the UK. He was sorry Nick and Ben hadn’t come after all. They had been with him last UNICON, two years ago in Switzerland; the Guys, well half of the Guys, away together again, like old times, like being back at Nottingham, but they couldn’t make it this year. Ben was a medical student now and couldn’t get time away and Nick was scuba diving; he couldn’t remember what the others were doing. Still, some of them were hoping to meet up and ride the Trans-Pennines later in the summer. That’d be good and there was always Snowdon next year, now that was tradition and none of them dared miss it.

None of the others in his “dorm” were competing in the race this morning, so they had no need to wake this early. He went down to the food technology classroom they had been using as a kitchen and got some breakfast. He had made the mistake two days ago of skipping breakfast before the 10K and he’d

paid for it heavily so today he was going to take a little more trouble with his preparation; today was a bigger undertaking, after all. That 10K had been bloody hard; so hot that morning and he hadn't eaten. As soon as the race started he'd taken a fall for no good reason. It was a hard course, a lot of gravel and a poor road surface. There were hundreds of riders in that race - a popular one - and loads of kids, including under 10s. They'd started the kids first for some reason and so they were all over the course and he'd been anxious not to knock any of them off, had taken a few unnecessary tumbles himself to keep out of their way, hurt his knee badly one time. On that shorter distance he'd felt obliged to push himself, to really race it and so he'd gone all out. Just missed the half hour time by 27 seconds, bloody annoying. Felt sick afterwards, really sick. Funny really, unicycling usually made him feel good, healthy even after a decent ride back home; it kept him fit and helped him manage stress. Well, this week it was causing him stress, making him ill - ha ha!



Illus. 18: ...unicycling usually made him feel good, healthy even after a decent ride back home; it kept him fit and helped him manage stress.

He didn't feel hungry this morning but he forced himself to eat a bowl of Cornflakes and a couple of bananas. He grabbed his gear and picked through the pile of unicycles in the entrance hall, finding his blue Coker and headed off

towards the station. There were a lot of others around, staying in other local schools and riding to the station to catch a train out to Bellarup for the start. It was Day 5 and he knew most of them by sight now if not by name, many of them having ridden together on Sunday in the 10K. They got some strange looks from the locals commuting to work at this time of day, but they were used to that, it came with the territory. You couldn't ride a unicycle and be bothered by what people said to you or how they looked at you – like you were a little bit mad, like you had a wheel missing. They greeted each other warmly and joked about the ride ahead. What was it about unicyclists, he wondered? They had such a laid back approach to the sport, they relished the run up to any event and when the race started they would all give it their absolute best shot taking it as seriously as any other sportsmen, but enjoying the experience and the camaraderie too. Even those who would be really racing for the top sport, the gold medal, the world championship title, would still be enjoying themselves and those around them, encouraging each other. Something about the sport attracted a good sort, that was why he loved it so much. A little bit different it was, you had to be willing to forge your own way, make your own path. There were no set expectations; you could do what you wanted to. If he went mountain biking at a mountain-bike park there'd be a million guys better than him and they'd all have a fixed idea of what they should be doing and expect him to do it too. Unicycling wasn't like that; you just had a go, did the best you could, strived for your own personal best, on the patio at home, in the woods with your mates, wherever you took it.

It was a good morning and he was on a high so Pete momentarily wondered why he was putting himself through this again. He had done it last time, last UNICON. He hadn't intended to but Ben had registered for it and was too lazy to bother with it when it came round so Pete had borrowed his big wheel and entered it under Ben's number. He was keen to get a ride in as he hadn't done the Muni as planned – the course was too difficult. He had never ridden a marathon distance in one go before then; hadn't trained for a long distance ride at UNICON, hadn't expected to do it after all, and boy, had he paid for it!! It had been a long, hard slog, 26 gruelling, even painful, miles - Ben's uni was too big for him so that hadn't helped his speed or comfort - and here he was

on his way to do it again. Of course he had intended to train for it this year. He was pleased to have the chance to do it again, to beat his previous time of three and a quarter hours, to set a better time, his own little challenge to himself, and he was going to ensure he did it well. He had planned to really ride a lot over the summer, to get fit, to do a lot of training. He'd not thought about where he wanted to come in the race, what position, he wasn't too bothered about that, but what time he wanted to have. That was something he could predict; if he trained this much and got this fit then he could do it in this time. He had set himself two goals; one, to beat his previous time; two, to beat the world record for marathon running. His brother and dad were really keen runners so there was a bit of family pride at stake, a bit of fun.

From the station at Farum it was a short ride to the start, a couple of kilometres, a bit of a warm-up. They got down to the start in good time but it was pretty busy already. Pete guessed there were about 150 competitors, mostly men it seemed, but that wasn't so surprising; a few children, teens mostly, he thought looking around. There was the girl from Hong Kong, the only participant from Hong Kong, fair play to her, she looked about 16 and only had a 24 inch wheel – blimey that would be hard. There were quite a few in their "Ride the Lobster" race shirts, making a statement, wanting to stand out in them. They would probably be the ones to watch for, still pretty fit from that five day race in Canada – amazing! There was a gazebo set up by the start line to provide some shade for the volunteers and officials as they got the computers ready. There might be a few world records broken in the different age categories, so the equipment had to be just right. The IUF was good at this sort of thing and whichever country took on UNICON was expected to adhere to these organisational details – this was the serious side of the sport coming out. Pete wouldn't be chasing any world records but was looking to better his own time, a personal record then, something to beat in two years. On the other side of the road the riders were gathering in a kind of corral; police officers (or were they army?) in faded camouflage fatigues, trying to keep the riders from sprawling all over the road, their supporters adding to the numbers. It was a quiet road but it hadn't been closed yet so there was still a flow of vehicles coming through. Pete could feel the tension in the air as the

riders psyched themselves up; even though it was an enjoyable thing, it was still a long way and a demanding physical feat so despite the frivolity the tension was mounting. It was a hot day too, another one in the 30s by the feel of things; that would make it harder. Pete started to get himself ready; a little nervous, a little anxious, apprehensive almost. He'd not done as much training as he'd intended to - well, it was hard, life got in the way.

The first group was lining up now; it was a staggered start. Those who had personal bests recorded at other events and so who had evidenced fast times over this distance were in the first couple of groups. Pete wasn't one of these and wasn't really bothered which group he started in; he'd been assigned to Number 6. There were about 15 in a group; they lined up together in a bunch, their Cokers at the ready for them to step up onto the pedals at the horn. The three foot wheel was quite high - Pete usually had to take a bit of a run at his! The volunteers checked everyone over before they were let off. "Helmet? Gloves? Kneepads?" one of them in the red t-shirts shouted out. "Yes!" was the general response – they were the rules of the UNICON marathon. Pete didn't mind, he always paid attention to safety and rode with pads and helmets, even on the road at home; still not that confident, he tended to be reasonably cautious. It had paid off too, he'd already done his ankle in three times but he was sure it would have been worse if he'd not been padded up. Still, just part of the sport, no permanent damage but he had worn through two sets of leg armour and two sets of wrist guards in his seven years! Someone obviously didn't share his view on safety. "134 has no gloves!" an eagle-eyed volunteer shouted.

"Someone get him some gloves or he can't start!" the red-shirt in charge called back. A pair of gloves appeared in the air.

Pete's group was lining up now. He breathed deeply and tried to focus on the task ahead; deep breaths, sweaty palms, knot in the stomach, slightly unpleasant taste in the mouth. The horn sounded and the riders were off. It was so unfair how those tall, long legged guys could just step up and be away, they made it look effortless.





Illus. 19: Pete's group was lining up now. He breathed deeply and tried to focus on the task ahead.

Pete took a run and was up and riding; the usual starting wobble, but he was off. The first three miles passed relatively easily, it was road-riding after all, so much easier than cross-country. The hills had been quick to appear though and were unexpected - Denmark was supposed to be flat, he thought, but here were rolling hills, big hills. OK, so they weren't really big hills, not like Snowdon or something, but they weren't expected so that made them tedious! Snowdon, now that was a big hill, a bloody big hill, a mountain really, but they did ride down it and not up, not that riding down was easy, just different. Thinking about it, they must've ridden down it half a dozen times, but then it was a tradition, one weekend between Christmas and Easter every year, the Guys. Yes, six times. The first time was at school and they'd only been riding about five months. It had been Pete's suggestion; he did a lot of walking there and it seemed like a good idea. It was great riding down from the top, one of his favourite rides probably. It was such amazing scenery; there was this really vicious drop just near the summit. You rode along a ridge at the top of it, it wasn't that dangerous, off to one side there were usually sheep grazing but the other side was a sheer drop, a few hundred feet down, not really dangerous but the old adrenalin sure kicked in, up there on that ridge. The



riding up there was really difficult, tough terrain, just how Pete liked it and the rest of the Guys. Naturally they always picked the hardest route down, but that was par for the course, the challenge. How well could they do? How much could they ride? You had to have permanent focus, be constantly thinking about what you were doing, about the next six feet of path in front of you, nothing else; otherwise you'd just fall off. Pure concentration.

Those first three miles were pretty good today, he got into a good pace, a comfy stride; he just had to keep this up for another 23 and it'd be in the bag. It was going to be OK. He was riding on his own, most of his group having raced off in the first mile, so it was pretty quiet, the roads were pretty rural. A car passed him every now and then, the windows wound down to let a breeze in on this hot morning, passengers cheering out of the windows, the driver piping the horn. Great, a bit of encouragement always helped. That had been the great thing about learning with the Guys: the encouragement for each other, the support, the camaraderie. Right from the beginning at the school circus club they had egged each other on. Who had he first gone along with? Was it Ben? No, it was Lou, definitely Lou. Lou had been really into juggling, was pretty good, could do five balls, and Pete had gone along with him to learn to juggle but from the very first session the unicycle had just seemed so much more appealing, it seemed to be calling him, it had his name on it. Lou had practised with six balls and Pete had practised with the unicycle for a few weeks. He could remember the frustration though, he just couldn't get it, couldn't stay on; God, it had annoyed him. He had become determined to do it, not to be beaten. Then a friend's relative was selling one, a really old Pashley, a bit battered about but Pete had bought it and practised at home every day. That was the breakthrough, the perseverance. He could recall the feeling of balance as he rode a few feet; then he'd fall off on the grass but that great sense of satisfaction was what made him have another go and another go. Within a week he was riding down the drive and within a month he was riding competently. At last he was like that kid the year below him, who could ride. Pete had watched him messing about on his uni in the playground – God, he was cool. No-one else at school could do that, come to think of it Pete didn't know anyone outside school who could do that, jumping up and

down the steps, bunny-hopping along the path. Looking back it was a bit sad wanting to be like someone else, now he liked to forge his own way, no longer so bothered by what others thought.

The Guys had really got together at that time, at school. They started doing stuff on the unis from the circus club; riding round the gym, trying to turn left – it was so much harder than turning right, something to do with the way your body works; they were all right-handed. He remembered how much they'd laughed in those early days, trying to ride round in a left-handed circle and forever ending up on the floor, they laughed and laughed at each other, looking so funny as they fell off those little wheels, not yet good enough to fall with grace, arms and legs flailing everywhere!! They'd started playing a bit of hockey at school, just amongst themselves, knocking the ball about, not much of a game when none of you could turn left!!! How they'd laughed! Pete remembered the ramp they had made up the sports-hall steps with that old plank of wood from the workshop. They'd practised riding up and down it for ages before they'd agreed to take it away and progress to hopping up and down. What fun! They were learning tricks together, pushing their own little boundaries together, having a laugh together and, without realising it, really bonding together. Thinking back now as he sat in that easy rhythm, riding through Farum on that hot sunny day, he remembered those times as good times. They were a group, a gang, mates. Pete realised now how much those friendships had meant to him at the time. He had been feeling awash in a year of people, boys, drifting amongst others, not really sure who he was or where he belonged. The Guys had changed all that, given him a defined group, good friends. They shared a common interest, a group identity; gave him an identity, no longer drifting, now forged with others. They stuck together, had to stick together: they were different from the rest and that wasn't always a good thing. Being different at school wasn't always a good thing; you felt like a party in the wilderness, you had to keep together or you'd die. He realised early on that he couldn't get along with everyone so he forged strong relationships with those he did, the Guys.



Illus. 20: They were learning tricks together, pushing their own little boundaries together.

There were six of them, Pete, Ben, Zach, Nick, Jonnie and Tom. Jonnie could already ride, had been riding since he was 8 or 9. They always used to tease him – it was all those folk festivals his hippie parents had taken him to as a child. Some guys in the year below had gotten into it to, almost a uni club at school. The maths teacher who ran the circus club was really pleased, he'd been so encouraging from the start. Come to think of it though, it was only last year Pete had actually seen him on a unicycle; strange, that. He'd always seemed bewildered by the stuff the Guys did, the tricks and that, guess he wasn't really into unicycling, any more than doing a bit of juggling on one, and had been surprised at the Guys then. He had helped the kids in the circus club who wanted to juggle or poi or stuff and so he had rarely come out into the playground to watch them practise. Whenever he did then he'd got a big surprise!

Of course learning with the Guys had had its down side too. They had ridden their unis a lot in skate-parks as teenagers - Pete remembered it somewhat painfully now. He would never take such big risks as the others, so never got such big rewards. It was usually seeing who could jump off the highest thing. Usually Ben or Zach, he recalled. He used to feel annoyed with himself 'cause he wasn't as good as the others, couldn't jump so far. Some of the skateboarders used to laugh at them, take this piss, but then thinking back

now he never saw them do much in the way of tricks, they just hung about all day. Bet they couldn't jump or spin come to think of it. They just thought it was cool so got the gear and hung around, getting in the way ... pissing everyone else off.

As he thought about those old jumps he remembered the ones in the chemistry lab, now that had been a real laugh. Mr. Walsh, he was a cool bloke and a good sport. Their form teacher, he didn't complain when they rode around the labs or even jumped off the benches. Pete recalled one lunchtime when they had cleared the test tubes and stuff out of the way and hopped from bench to bench. Mr. Walsh had sat on a stool laughing and shaking his head. He was a good sport; Pete had liked him, felt liked by him, encouraged by him, helped him to believe in himself even. They'd talked to Mr. Walsh about their unicycling, showed him videos they'd made of each other doing tricks and stuff. They'd watched videos of Dan Heaton and Jeff Groves, they saw what was possible, stuff they'd never dreamt of doing, but they'd set up the old ramp and have a go and before too long they'd be doing some of those tricks themselves, making their own videos.

The next six miles seemed to go by in a bit of a blur as he reminisced. It was comforting, pleasing, while he was out on that ride, pretty much on his own. He didn't have to think much, just keep the comfy pace going. That breeze was a bit annoying, though; it had felt cooling while he stood in line ready for the off but now he was on the move it was annoying, a bit of a headwind in fact, blowing against him. Those hills were still rolling too. He slowed the pace slightly; his left knee started to trouble him, felt sore. He'd bashed it in the 10K race the other day, knocked it at right angles, and it was sore now. He passed houses from time to time, the people outside, cheering the riders past. There were volunteers placed at regular intervals; they were easy to spot before you got to them, those red t-shirts. They shouted encouragement as he passed, it spurred him on. That first lap was mostly a blur; the course was made up of two laps with a couple of Ks run in and a couple of Ks run out, start and finish at the same spot then. He'd blanked most of the first lap, trying hard to focus on his riding and being carried away in the rhythm of it. As he approached the

end of the first lap, nine miles, he started to feel bad, rough, sick, knackered. If he could just complete half way, just a couple of miles to go, then he might quit; half way was a good distance, 13 miles, further than the 10K he'd done the other day, still respectable; what was the point in pushing himself to the end? He only had himself to please, a good 13 miles was OK. He felt horrific, this was horrific, the ride was horrific ... nine miles he'd done. There was a large group of volunteers up ahead, their red t-shirts a welcome sight.

Pete threw himself down on the ground, exhausted, nauseous. Some Germans ran over to him, forcing half a banana on him. They followed this with a handful of dextrose tablets telling him he needed to get some sugar in him. He did as he was told unquestioningly, thankful someone else was taking control; he couldn't think straight. They poured water into his helmet, cooling his head through the gaps. They poured water into his mouth too; it refreshed him, brought him back to his senses. They talked to him the whole time, encouraging him, heartening him, urging him on. He felt somewhat woozy, nauseous, sick in his mouth, but the water had been refreshing. He shook his head, closed his eyes for a couple of seconds and breathed deeply. They picked him up, one on each side and walked him up a and down the road a bit. They didn't speak much English. "Want to finish race?" one of them asked.

"Want to end up in ditch?" the other questioned. "Don't go so fast next lap!" he cautioned. They walked him up and down a bit more. His head cleared and he suddenly felt OK. It was OK. He was gonna do it. They sat him up on the Coker and sent him on his way, steadying the uni for him as he pedaled off. Felt OK. It was OK. He was gonna do it. He was going to finish the course.

Pete flew round the first half of the second lap; he felt good now. He passed a group of about 20 or 30 kids outside their school. They clapped and cheered as he approached and he rode off in the distance with their whoops still ringing in his ears. He stopped twice and stretched to stop the cramp setting in. He drank plenty each time and headed off feeling good. He felt OK. It was OK. He was gonna do it. He was going to finish the course.





Illus. 21: Pete flew round the first half of the second lap; he felt good now.

He hardly saw any other riders; that was a bit unnerving, hard to gauge where you were in the pack - not that he expected to be up front at all, but he hoped he wasn't last. Occasionally one of the leaders would catch him and pass him, lapping him. They sped past confidently, hardly breaking into a sweat the whole way round. He didn't care, he'd just keep at this pace, taking the German's advice; he settled into it. All he had to do was finish. If he beat his previous time great, if not so what, there was always next time. He was passed by a kid on a 24 inch wheel at one point, now that was a bit hard to swallow, the kid only looked about 11. Pete took him on a long uphill section though, that's when the big wheels really came into their own. Rather annoyingly the kid took him back when it flattened out. Pete laughed to himself, good luck to him! He wished he'd been unicycling at 11; he'd be bloody brilliant now, winning this marathon instead of just settling for a finish! He hadn't started riding until he was about 15 though, and he had never been

into distance or speed in those early days. They'd spent most of their time hanging round BMX tracks and skate parks, they, the Guys. He hadn't seriously thought he'd be able to do half the tricks they tried. It was just something to do, somewhere to go, someone to be with; all weekend, every weekend, with his mates, the Guys ... but, oh, it had become so much more. Pete smiled to himself – they were such good days. He recalled their annual trips to the Nottingham Juggling Conventions, as part of these, first as part of the school, sharing the coach with jugglers and poi spinners, then on their own, the Guys, getting a lift from someone's mum or dad. It was a laid back event, one of his favorite 'cause of the informality of the thing. It was billed as a juggling convo but anyone was welcome – there was always a space for unicyclists. They'd enjoyed hanging out there together, watching the evening show and showing off their skills to non-riders – had always made him feel good about himself.

He was back on the final straight now - he recognised it from the start, about a mile and a half to go. His bloody crank though, it had worked loose; still at least it was the left one so coasting with the left foot allowed him to rest his sore knee. It was hard work though, riding one footed – he'd never really got into freestyle tricks; he laughed to himself. Perhaps he should go in for the one-footed race on Friday, ha, ha. He wasn't going to let the bloody crank beat him and quit a mile from the end so he just kept at it, his right leg taking the pressure. The sweat was pouring down his forehead.

"Go on Pete!"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!"

He was conscious of some kids cheering him on at the side of the road. He glanced over, oh, it was the UK kids, on top of the camper van shouting his name and cheering him in. One of them had an air-horn. "Honk! Honk! Honk!"

"Yer, yer, yer!"

"Pete, go, go!"

He could see the finish line ahead of him and the timing funnel to ride into. Two years ago he'd fallen off just at the finish, that was bloody embarrassing,

felt a right twit; that was not going to happen today. He stayed on long enough to cross the finish but collapsed as he got into the funnel, laying shaking on the grass, crashed out, the sweat pouring out of him. He just lay there and succumbed to it, whatever it was – exhaustion; the sheer relief of finishing washing over him, taking him. A German woman came over and fed him some sugar lumps. What was it with the Germans? They'd really helped him out today! He was vaguely conscious of a couple of people lifting him out of the way of other finishers and into the shade – that was welcomed. He came round gradually, exhaustion having taken over his body. He was shaking now and ate some bananas and more sugar to try and control himself. He downed some water too, half of it just running down his neck and his shirt but at least it was refreshing, cooling. He lay on the grass with his eyes shut. He'd done it, he'd finished. Who cared what the time was?

He had no idea how long he had lain there but he became aware of someone shaking him – “The coach is going soon, you need to get up if you want a lift back – stand up slowly though. I'll help you with your uni.” Pete came to his senses and got up, he downed another bottle of water instantly and shook his head to clear it; it worked. He walked slowly over to where others were loading their unis into the trailer and did the same, then took his seat on the coach and promptly fell asleep.

\* \* \*

He felt so much better after a couple of hours on his bed (well, his mattress) and a shower. He was hungry and ready for a beer now. He looked around the school but there was no-one much around so he walked over to the gyms; couldn't face riding quite so soon, feeling a bit tender down below! He found Sam practising for the Trials. They'd set up some piles of pallets and a couple of old wooden drums on the car park. Sam was hopping from one to the other and Pete watched for a few minutes.



He'd dabbled in Trials at the beginning, at school with the Guys, but hadn't ridden a trials uni for ages, couple of years probably. Sam was looking good for the competition tomorrow; he'd won it two years ago so was in with a good chance.

"Fancy a beer?" Pete called.

"Cheers mate, need to keep practising," Sam called back. "Catch you later!"



Illus. 22: He found Sam practising for the Trials.

Pete walked along the corridor to the results boards, hoping the times would be up by now. They were and he scanned them quickly looking for his name:

RICHARDSON, PETER

UK

2.32.14

Two hours and thirty two minutes – yes! He punched the air and smiled to himself. He'd done it, met his goal! Yes! He'd set himself the challenge of

beating his previous time of 3.14, quite an easy challenge he had to admit, but then at one point this morning he didn't think he'd do it. Now though he felt good, looking back on the ride. Beaten his time by 42 minutes – excellent. He was hoping for 2.30, but well, what's an extra two minutes. He'd beaten Josh's best time for running a marathon though, 2.55, so that was good. He'd have to text Josh later.

He went into Gym 4 and looked around. He saw Sarah and Spud on the other side of the gym with Richard from New Zealand and Mike from the States. Peter had met them at the last UNICON too; that was the cool thing about UNICON, you made some good friends and got to meet up with them again two years later. They were watching the final of the basketball A league; it was France against Puerto Rico and they were playing for World Champion title. Pete waited for a pause in the play and darted across to join them. The gym was packed with spectators and the atmosphere was electric. The Puerto Ricans were favourites and had some loud support.

**"P-U-E-R-T-O R-I-C-O"** a section of the crowd screamed, to the accompaniment of air-horns, drums and maracas.

**"P-U-E-R-T-O R-I-C-O".**

The French team looked deflated as the Puerto Ricans in their red, white and blue strips bore down on them on their matching unis with blue tyres and red, spangled rims. They were big guys and looked pretty mean; one guy in particular, Number 11. He had a narrow pointed beard and a red ribbon tying back his long ponytail, matching sweatbands on his head and wrists. He even had one blue trainer and one red trainer. He looked mean, but God was he good! If anyone thought unicycling was for clowns they should see this big guy! He dribbled it down the pitch effortlessly, moving like lightning towards the basket. He stopped dead, his uni remaining perfectly still as he stood up on the pedals and shot the ball. It bounced off the board and fell into the basket comfortably. The air-horns went off and an old guy, who was obviously the national team leader, did a little victory dance behind the basket.



Illus. 23: ...it was France against Puerto Rico and they were playing for World Champion title.

“Got anything on tomorrow?” Richard asked.

“No, its Trials tomorrow, so want to be around to watch Sam,” Pete replied.

“I’m having a go myself,” said Richard. “Not expecting a top spot but should do quite well. They’ve got some great gear brought in for it. Have you seen it piled up in the car park? There’re gonna be some wicked lines!”

“I’m having a go too!” Sarah butted in.

“Good on you!” encouraged Richard. “Girl power – we need some more girls in trials, show the lads how it’s done!” He gave her a high five.

“I’m saving myself for the Muni now,” Pete chipped in.

“Me too! Which ones you doing?” asked Mike.

“Uphill, downhill and cross-country hopefully. It depends how hard they are. That downhill in Switzerland was too bloody difficult – remember it?” Pete smiled to himself; the route was full of big boulders and so wet and slippery. He was more realistic this year; his goal was just to ride the course!

“Yer, wicked! What about North Shore?”

“No, I’m not really into that, too much like Trials and I’m no good at that.”

“Anyone fancy a beer after this?” interrupted Sarah.

“That’s the best thing anyone’s said to me all day!” laughed Pete. “I think I’ve earned one after the morning I’ve had!”

## Chapter 12

### **Walking the Walk, Riding the Ride – Culture, Subculture and Key Influences**

'Walking the walk', 'riding the ride' and, indeed, 'talking the talk' are all key elements of unicycling culture. There is a certain walk, a cool swagger that comes when pushing a unicycle along, pretending that you don't want anyone to notice it but motivated by the unusual nature of the sport and so inevitably by the attention you attract! A certain style of riding is shared by unicyclists once the early wobbles are mastered; and a language characterized by technical terms and a positive outlook on life unites those who ride and those who support. As a new rider progresses in his skill so his ability to walk the walk, ride the ride and talk the talk increases; he becomes more familiar with the culture and subcultures. Similarly, a new researcher learns to talk the talk, use the research jargon, as her confidence and experience develops. Unicycling, like many other physical pursuits, provides activities, rules and a terminology of its own which join together to form a culture or subculture. This culture - a way of riding, of talking - provides an identity for both individuals and groups. Having considered self-identity, its development and significance, in the previous literature chapter, I will now move on to consider group identity, often expressed through a culture or a subculture.

Culture is a combination of background, traditions, values and lifestyles which individuals share with others in a particular group. All of these can vary between different groups in society, according to elements of ethnicity, economic status, regional location and so on. Culture is learnt as part of the process of socialization which takes place throughout people's lives in a variety of social and cultural settings and via different agencies. Primary socialisation occurs within the family or care unit, where values, morals, prejudices, stereotypes and attitudes are all passed from one generation to the next (Bignold, 2006d).



## Subculture

Subculture can be explained by two different, but related, definitions. Thornton (1997, cited in Ford and Brown, 2006) defines 'sub' as being a group which is subordinate to, or beneath, society or culture, but within it. This definition implies that the group is somehow negative in comparison to mainstream society. The second definition (Crosset and Beal, 1997, cited in Ford and Brown, 2006) refers to 'sub' as a level of analysis of activity below the macro level. It would seem that the second definition implies size of the subgroup, its being smaller than the mainstream society, rather than placing negative value on it. As such the second definition would be more appropriate to the subculture of unicycling examined in this thesis. It is indeed a "world within a world, so to speak, but it is a world" (Gordon, 1947, p.132). and so meets the definition of subculture as defined by Gordon. This is a relatively simplistic view of subcultures and when compared to those definitions given above demonstrates the development in this research area. Gordon's work is still seen as significant to today's academics and was included in a recent collection of essays by Gelder (2005). A helpful definition of subculture which fits my thesis is provided by Gelder:

*Subcultures are groups of people that are in some way represented as non-normative and/or marginal through their particular interests and practices, through what they are, what they do and where they do it. (Gelder, 2005, p.1)*

Unicycling is a non-normative activity, an unusual sport; those who take part in it are at the margins of cycling or circus performance.

There are two different elements to subculture which I will draw on. The first is culture or subculture as it applies to youth and the second is as it applies to sport; indeed Wheaton (2004) recognises that there is a "long-standing association between sport and subculture" (p.283). There is a strong link too between youth subcultures and sport subcultures, as Elling and Knoppers (2005) suggest in their research on youth sport, as both provide means by

which “young people start to make their own choices between different value orientations and leisure activities and search for their own identity” (p.205).

A simple definition of subculture can easily be seen to apply to young people or physical activity:

*...groups of people that are represented or who represent themselves – as distinct from normative social values or “mainstream” culture through their particular interest, through what they are, what they do and where they do it. (Gelder, 2005, p.i)*

Gelder includes in his identification of subcultures based on his definition above groups such as skinheads and clubbers which are age-specific, in these two cases predominantly youth, and skateboarders, a lifestyle sport group.

## **Youth Subcultures**

Interest in youth has become a major focal concern of politicians of all parties and society generally (Clarke, 2005). Young people are stereotypically perceived as being easily influenced by popular culture which the media tend to portray as negative; threatening morality, challenging adults and leading youth into crime (Hill and Tisdall, 1997). Those subcultures which have received the most attention tend to have been those which are specific to young people and which are highly visible:

*By youth subcultures we are referring to highly visible, named groups of young people who are apparently characterized by their style and hairstyle, music preferences and beliefs; punks, gothics, hippies and skinheads, for example. (Widdicombe and Woofit, 1995, p.28)*

However, many young people belong to social groupings which are not highly visible, threatening or challenging and to which adults often belong too, either within the same specific group or as a sub-group. Unicycling is an example of

this: young riders socialise with peers and with adults, as well as with younger children. However within the different disciplines of unicycling some are more popular with young people than others and youth sub-groups can develop in disciplines with a generally wider age appeal. Gordon makes a distinction between separate subcultures and separate units of the same subculture. He questions whether or not one factor, such as different geographical locations, is sufficient to set up a separate subculture. He does not give an answer to this question but suggests that field study of particular communities would allow exploration of this. In my study, the factor which may provide a distinct sub-group is age, and specifically youth. I will explore this because, as Garratt states, "The importance of subcultural developments in the lives of young people is often overlooked but is deeply significant" (2004, p.147).

The French philosopher Bourdieu describes culture as a concept of capital, drawing on an economic model. In his view it is a currency that people use, rather than an intrinsic quality, and one that is acquired through competition with others (Bourdieu, 1984). As well as being cultural, capital can also be social, economic or physical. Within his conceptual framework people occupy a *habitus*, a sphere in which they operate. Each person's habitus is unique to them and is built by individual histories, personal current contexts and future contexts (Raey, 2006). Individual histories include early childhood experiences and subsequent socialisation within the family. For an adolescent this individual history will be influenced by his or her current context, i.e., changing relationship with the family.

Different social groups value different cultural capital. The assumption is that those groups who hold "power" value their own culture and so to get on in that group anyone entering it must hold, or be able to gain, the same cultural capital. As such it is often white, middle class values which other groups have to adhere to or be able to fit in with (Stevens, 2006). However Robbins (2000) warns against the frequent misinterpretation of Bourdieu's ideas which imply that cultural capital is a direct expression of class position. With respect to my study it may be argued that in current British society traditional sports are

seen as having higher status than newer lifestyle sports and so the cultural capital of those who play traditional sports is worth more than those who take part in lifestyle sports. This is evidence, for example, in the significance given to traditional sports by mainstream society.

Thornton (1996) has adapted Bourdieu's thinking on cultural capital to consider subcultural capital. She identifies it as knowledge, goods or behaviour which give status or social advantage to an individual with regard to a subculture they belong to or aspire to be a member of. She gives the example of a fashionable haircut or CD collection to "clubbing" subculture. In unicycling, it may be a particular saddle, endorsed by a current role-model, or a t-shirt from a certain meet. This idea is reinforced by Hodkinson (2002), who has observed members of a particular subculture, Goths, classifying and judging others against their subcultural capital, "a conscious and mutually agreed set of standards" (p.43). When cultural capital is considered with specific regard to subcultures as described above it could be seen to be significant to unicycling. Thornton also establishes a hierarchy of dance moves within club culture as having different levels of subcultural capital. A direct comparison can be made to unicycling here; for example, a 360 degree turn in Freestyle holds greater status than a 180 degree turn, or a grind followed by a back-flip in Street is seen as more impressive than a grind with a simple drop-off at the end, as each is related to a different skill level.

As Bourdieu developed his framework he came to the conclusion that those with cultural capital are often found in autonomous universes, such as the arts or social work (Fowler, 2000). Such social or professional groups are often committed to "disinterestedness in profit-making" and so are not interested in developing their cultural capital further while those who do not have any may go to great lengths to acquire more in order to move on socially or professionally. He describes those with cultural capital as more interested in "social capital". It has been argued that those who participate in lifestyle sports take an ambivalent or oppositional stance to authority (Ford and Brown, 2006). This could be interpreted as a lack of interest in profit-making or in



materialistic values. With unicycling being a lifestyle sport it could be assumed that those who ride are not interested in acquiring the cultural capital of mainstream society, or more specifically of mainstream cycling. With regard to social capital Bourdieu regarded trust, collaboration and cooperation as key values (Grenfell, 2006). These are all qualities which are important in the sport of unicycling and so it may be that for my thesis Bourdieu's ideas on social capital are more important than that of cultural capital.

## **Sport Subculture**

Individual sports can be described as cultures or subcultures, but in any event it cannot be denied that sport generally is a significant part of Western, if not world culture, as Cashmore recognises:

*Whether we like it or not, we live in a culture in which sports play an increasingly important role. Once, the impact of sport was segmented, it was an area distinct from many of the other, more important domains of our lives. Now sport is central. (Cashmore, 2000, p. vii)*

Sport is part of our culture, but it can also be a culture or subculture in its own right. There has been no academic study to date which has examined unicycling as a subculture. Indeed no academic debate has yet taken place as to whether or not it is a sport, an art form or a lifestyle. As there is no body of specific literature on which to draw I will, instead, seek to draw parallels with other sports and particularly other lifestyle sports, those of surfing and skateboarding. Surfing has recently received academic attention as a phenomenon with socio-cultural dimensions (Ford and Brown, 2006; Wheaton, 2004), analysed against an overview of subculture and social theory. This is based on a generally accepted definition of subcultures within sport:

*... any system(s) of beliefs, values and norms ... shared and activity participated in by an appreciable minority of people within a particular culture. (Jary and Jary, 1995)*

This clearly links to the definition of subculture by Crosset and Beal favoured above as it is based on size rather than possible value judgements. Subculture has been explored as three different concepts (Irwin, 1997):

1. social worlds - social relationships which are not tied to any particular territory or collectivity;
2. an explicit lifestyle (or scene), which connotes a shared category or commitment which may be tentative and variable;
3. an action system, in which a set of values and cultural meanings are conceived as making up a whole, with some measure of coherence.

Within these concepts an individual may, and probably will, opt to identify with more than one social world, or scene. This may be simultaneously or alternately (Irwin).

The personal consumption theory of subculture revolves around matters of personal consumption and their associated meanings. In the past classical theorists have viewed consumption negatively, regarding it as being driven by greed, pride and envy (Ford and Brown, 2006). Contemporary social theory has taken a more balanced view of the process of consumption. Featherstone (1991), for example, sees consumption as the manifestation of lifestyles in the choice of clothes people wear, the leisure activities they take part in, consumer goods they use and their bodily dispositions. These now cross the once traditional boundaries of social class. Lipovetsky (1994) views Featherstone's consumption as the means by which a person expresses his or her individuality. The consumption lifestyle with regard to surfing has been identified by Ford and Brown (2006) as:

- the cost of surfing equipment – which is not especially high;
- the type of work or employment a surfer is engaged in – which is generally pursued as it allows for “chasing the waves” or maximising opportunities to surf;

- general expenditure to enable surfing to take place – such as travel costs.

These three elements could all apply equally to unicyclists, albeit to adults (young people of compulsory school age would not be in a position to follow the second one, at least not during the week or term-time).

Skateboarding, like surfing, has received growing academic attention over the last decade (Beal, 1996; Beal and Weidman, 2003; Borden, 2001) with Beal recognising it as a subculture. It has been identified as a “counter-culture” by Borden using Lefebvre’s idea that emphasis might increasingly be placed on use over exchange. The study of skateboarding has shown it to be an activity to promote the reassertion of “use values” or involvement rather than a focus on consumption in the traditional sense. An example of this is that it is concerned with ownership, or control at a grass-roots level, participation, rather than consumption in terms of wealth. This is illustrated below in an interview Borden conducted with a skateboarder :

*Any place you have concrete you can excel. You don't need anything else to do it, you don't need teams, you don't need much money, and it's infinitely adaptable to circumstances. (Borden, 2001, p.260)*

This can be applied to unicycling, and particularly the subdisciplines of Trials and Street unicycling which use urban street furniture as a playground for riders, balancing along railings or jumping up steps. Skateboarding is seen to occupy a far greater role in the lives of dedicated boarders than merely a leisure pursuit. It is acknowledged as being a way of life, with its own values and ethos: a culture or subculture as explained by Borden:

*Skateboarders, as young adults, see themselves not as the reserve army waiting to serve industry, but as living according to a different rationale. The totality with which skateboarders conceive of their opposition to work and career patterns is crucial for ... skateboarders do not so much temporarily escape from the routinized world of school, family and social conventions as replace it with a whole new way of life. (Borden, 2001, p.259)*

Such an ethos and originality is a criterion of lifestyle sports (see Chapter 1) with regard to Wheaton's research (2005). The spirit of Borden's quote would be true for those who engage with skateboarding at a significant level of participation, regardless of skill level, but it may not apply to an occasional boarder. Observations, interviews and conversations I have had also show it to be true for many unicyclists. The whole new way of life that Borden refers to includes, in part, an alternative use of space, using the urban street environment not what it was intended for, but as a prop for extreme physical activity. This urban space, or hard landscape, is part of the urban culture of skateboarding and related activities. Part of the attraction of such spaces, Wells (2002) suggests, is that they are not of interest to adults and so youth can easily demarcate them as spaces of their own, as places to establish their own subculture.

Subculture and lifestyle theories have been analysed in relation to sport studies with a number of different approaches emerging. Some of these have been identified by Ford and Brown (2006) as interpretative approaches which seek to understand sport behaviours in terms of the meanings that participants place on their actions. Such interpretative analysis would seem to be appropriate for the sport of unicycling where concerns with authenticity and individual expression are central. Hermeneutic textual and discourse analysis approaches consider the way in which sporting social worlds are continually constructed and reinvented. In contrast human geographical approaches focus on traditions rather than re-inventions. They explore the significance of sports as representations of places and rituals. Ethno-methodology approaches consider sport subcultures as a process of socialisation with an emphasis on an individuals sporting "career" or time spent progressing in the sport, with the focus on the person rather than the place. Within the interpretative approaches Ford and Brown (2006) regard a sociological framework developed by Elias as significant. This framework views sport as a means of "increasing exercise of self-control over feeling and behaviour, in a cultural shift from external to internal constraints" (Ford and Brown, p.27). It explores sports cultures as groups of people "bonded in dynamic

constellations” with fairly high levels of individual autonomy but at the same time reliant on networks of interdependence. This framework would certainly fit the social structure of unicycling, where people participate as individuals but rely on others for social sporting opportunities. Post-structural, critical and postmodern perspectives have also been developed and are acknowledged by Ford and Brown in relation to surfing. These explore, in turn, the analysis of discursive formations of subculture, processes relating to the body, sexuality and identity and finally the acknowledgement that more than one approach to knowledge is possible. Ford and Brown do not favour the adoption of one single approach but recommend the melding of various approaches as appropriate to particular studies of subculture.

Sport, music, politics and leisure are all undergoing rapid change and development in today’s “postmodern world” and consequently it is argued by some that this requires a new approach to theorising about young people and the activities they take part in (Weinzierl and Muggleton, 2003). This approach is known as “post-subcultural studies”. It identifies the

*... shifting social terrain of the new millennium, where global mainstreams and local substreams rearticulate and restructure in complex and uneven ways to produce new, hybrid cultural constellations. (Weinzierl and Muggleton, 2003, p.3)*

Weinzierl and Muggleton’s hybrid cultural constellations are the mixing of different subcultures and the close cohabitation of different social groups - so much so that boundaries between them become blurred at the edges. The approach argues that with the coming of globalisation the parameters that defined cultural practices in the past have been radically altered. Cultural, or subcultural, theory must therefore be able to describe the “elasticity and fluidity” of twenty-first century subcultures (Stahl, 2003), whether they are youth subcultures or sports subcultures. The localised context is seen as less important today than the interrelated and interdependent contexts which exist within global processes.

## Neotribes

This notion of fluidity is particularly relevant when considering young people and their cultural or subcultural memberships; an idea reinforced by Bennet and Kahn-Harris (2004) who stress “the increasing fluidity of youth cultural membership”. A key proponent of such movement across different cultural groups is Maffesoli (1996). He puts forward the concept of “neotribes”:

*Without the rigidity of the forms of organisation with which we are familiar, it refers more to a certain ambience, a state of mind, and is preferably to be expressed through lifestyles that favour appearance and form. (Maffesoli, 1996, p.98, cited in Bennet and Kahn-Harris, 2004)*

The increased fluidity of cultural and subcultural membership is key to Maffesoli and is demonstrated by the unstable nature of social relations in today’s society. He uses the term “neo” to distinguish them from groupings of the 1970s. An interesting example of a neotribe is provided by Bennet and Kahn-Harris, who apply the concept to contemporary dance-music culture.

*The dance-club setting through its provision of a space for expressions of togetherness, based on articulations of fun, relaxation and pleasure, can be seen as one of many forms of temporal engagement through which such neotribal associations are formed. (Bennet and Kahn-Harris, 2004, p.12)*

This is an interesting example for to me as it suggests similarities to unicycling. The phrase “provision of a space for expressions of togetherness, based on articulations of fun, relaxation and pleasure” could be a description of a unicycle meet, a hockey match or a Trials course for example, although there may be an added element of technical or physical challenge. Tribes promote a feeling of togetherness based on direct involvement with the particular social group. According to Maffesoli’s concept, there may be an ostensible goal for the tribe, but it is not essential. With unicycling the apparent goal would be to learn to ride proficiently, however, as an interview with the chairperson of the UK Union of Unicyclists confirmed, some members

of the unicycling community (and so the subculture) cannot ride but are involved in the sport in a supporting capacity, such as myself.

Sweetman (2004) develops Maffesoli's concept, describing neotribalism as an aesthetic form of society which not only favours appearance and form, but also shared feelings and experiences as opposed to formalised membership criteria or a commitment to a particular ideological belief. In the context of neotribes Sweetman suggests that a particular place, thing or behaviour can take on an iconic significance, acting as a badge of honour, which itself reinforces social cohesion; the unicycle could be seen as this badge of honour.

The concept of neotribes is useful as the notion of fluidity is apparent within and across unicycling and the different disciplines within it. The data show how individual riders move in and out of different subcultural groups as they take up new elements of the sport; gathering and then scattering as described by Malbon (1998) as individuals come together for meets and then continue as individuals until the next meet, specialising often in one or two disciplines and identifying themselves particularly in relation to those. Malbon conceptualises this as "transitory tribes" in order to "reflect the highly specialized nature of these constantly in-transit, continually re-forming and temporarily bounded social interactions" (p.280). He places an emphasis on individuals "flitting between groups", with the different spaces used by each tribe being a critical influence over young people in particular as they aspire to join one tribe over another.

*For young people especially, there are certain spaces and contexts within those spaces which appeal more to them than do other spaces and contexts. (Malbon, 1998, p.280)*

The young men who are trials unicyclists, and whom I refer to in my own story within this thesis, find great appeal in the urban nature of the Trials and Street courses or environments as opposed to the formal space of a hockey court. Despite using the phrase "transitory tribes" Malbon (1998) goes on to criticise Maffesoli's concept of neo-tribes for failing to address the demanding,

practical and stylistic requirements of many youth cultures. In his later work Malbon favours the term “lifestyle” over neotribe. He focuses on the issue of consumer creativity, commodities; in this case a unicycle or related equipment and clothing, become cultural resources, cultural capital. Malbon argues that individuals are more creative in their consumerism than Maffesoli gives them credit for and use commodities in “the making and re-making of their image and identity”. I have already presented a case for unicycling to be acknowledged as a lifestyle sport; however this term would not exclude it, or disciplines within it, from being seen as neotribal. To me whichever term is used is not relevant, what is key is the fluidity with which individuals, and particularly youth, can and do move within the different discipline related subcultures where, as in other subcultures, “identities are fluid, mobile and on the move” (Muggleton, 2000, p.54).

In the past the media were seen as critical to the success and continuation of the dominant culture by groups such as the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (Stahl, 2003). They were regarded as an integral tool which labelled and reinforced the negative status of the “other” groups. In contrast, post-subcultural theorists recognise that the media are

*... integral to the formation of subcultures, playing a significant role in both their origin as well as prolonging their lifecycle. (Stahl, 2003, p.31)*

This is in part due to the development of different forms of the media including virtual media such as the Internet. They enable communication of ideas and images critical to the survival of subcultures and no longer restrict cultural activity to physically bounded sites. Indeed Maguire (1999) recognises the impact that globalisation is having on the exchange and “interweaving” of cultures and subcultures “facilitated by and within sport” (p.7). A second change in theory is the shift away from a linear description of the development of group identity or individual identity within a group. Instead there is a greater emphasis on non-linear development acknowledging more multidimensional influences and building on Bourdieu's recognition that activities occur within and between groups.



Interestingly Weinzierl and Muggleton, when promoting post-subcultural theories, do not make any reference to sport and its place within subcultures. Instead they focus on music, politics and dress as the central identities within youth subcultures today. There are a variety of factors, or identities, which have a significant impact on subculture as it applies to youth, and particularly to young people unicycling. I have observed these as, in no particular order, the influence of the media, visual imagery, dress, language and peers.

The influence of peers on identity, through subculture, has increased as young people spend greater amounts of time in the company of peers than was the norm ten or twenty years ago. Young people now spend longer periods of time in a state of semi-dependency and in the company of their peers and this has had an impact on the styles they adopt and on the groups and products with which they identify (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007, p. 80). The media are a significant element in communication between peers, locally and over vast global distances now made possible by the internet.

'The media' includes the internet and has already been acknowledged above as having a significant role in the survival of subcultures today. In today's global world people can consume media from around the world and this has a significant impact on both individual and group identity (Rizvi, 2006). Although Rizvi discusses this phenomenon of global mobility with regard to education, it can equally be applied to unicycling. Local cultural practices are being shaped by globalisation which has a hugely significant impact on the development of identities, culture, community and localities. Sangay's story, immediately following this chapter, illustrates this.

Young people's relationship to conformity and the extent to which they choose to conform to a particular social group, subculture, or not, is highly significant in their construction of their self-identity. As such there is a key link between self-identity, subculture and group identity; it is their self-esteem or confidence which influences their desire to conform or to pursue individuality. The desire

to conform or to rebel will differ from individual to individual and so blanket assumptions should not be made, as Miles reminds us:

*In other words, one of the most important things to remember about young people nowadays is that they cannot easily be pigeon-holed, not least because they are constantly treading a peculiarly delicate path between media influence and freedom of choice, a peculiarly delicate path between conformity and individual meaning. (Miles, 2000, p.183)*

Indeed of the five narratives I have presented, some riders wish to conform to unicycling subcultures and be part of a social group with a shared identity, (Pete and Sangay), while others, (Max, for example), prefer to ride as individuals and in this way express their personal identity.

### **Unicycling as a Subculture**

Unicycling is recognised as a subculture by many who participate in the sport and who give thought to such things, including the president of the Unicycling Society of America, who describes it as “a whole subculture” (Gelles, 2008). Like other sports it is a social practice; it provides a common activity in which internal values are realised in the pursuit of excellence. (Excellence may be at many different levels and may simply be basic mastery to some.) The internal values can only be achieved by engaging in the activity and so can only be shared by those who take part in it. These internal values are identified by Kew (1997) as the exercise of skills, the testing and developing of physical capabilities, the experience of exhilaration and achievement and social interaction with others engaged in the same goal. Each of these values can clearly be related to unicycling. It is a physical activity, an activity which requires a considerable amount of skill. As I have already illustrated through my own example, someone could appreciate these values and participate in the subculture without actually riding.

Whether or not individuals are taking part in a team activity or riding individually there is usually some related social interaction with other

unicyclists be it as part of a club or a larger, but less frequent, meet. Observations in my earlier research indicate that this shared experience of unicycling serves to bond individuals together to create a social practice (Bignold, 2004 and 2005).

As well as being social practices, Kew (1997) regards some sports as social institutions, with social practices that are regularly repeated and which have a significant social structure. A rugby club or football club would be a good example of this with a clearly defined and well established social structure and rules. The social structure is required to sustain and develop the social practice. Social institutions like these are concerned with external values, (for example, fame and wealth,) and are far less driven by intrinsic values. It is the very lack of this formal social structure in lifestyle or extreme sports which can make them so appealing to young people. This is recognised by Bennett and Lachowetz (2004), writing about what they call 'action sports':

*Action sports speak to youth culture, as they represent elements that this demographic sees as important, including creativity, individuality, friendship/camaraderie (even within a competitive setting), and a style that can only be developed when not constrained by teams and rules found in traditional sports like football, baseball and basketball. (Bennett and Lachowetz, 2004, p.241)*

Unicycling is a physical activity which brings young people into contact with others. Because of the intensity of it there are frequent interludes of rest and recovery which provide natural opportunities for social interaction. The common interest or ability (or initial lack of ability) unites those who do it. It provides a group identity but not necessarily a formal group identity in the way a team game might. Unicycling is a social practice; it is not a social institution. Many people unicycle on their own, but a lot will come together on a monthly or yearly basis to meet with other unicyclists. There are unicycling clubs in existence for those who want a greater, or more frequent, degree of social interaction. Observations of mine suggest that these tend not to be highly structured and so they do not form an institution (Bignold, 2005). Instead they create space for individuals driven by intrinsic values and do not seek extrinsic

values for club recognition. At UNICON XIV, which included world championship competitions, while there was great pride amongst medal winners the medals did not seem to me to be motivators in themselves for the vast majority of the participants.

Unicycling, I suggest then, provides social interaction for those who want it and an identity, either group or individual. One example of this is Trials unicycling; observations at British Unicycle Conventions show that this is the most popular form of unicycling among young people in the UK at present. It has an element of urban identity about it and those young people who take part in it often dress in a particular style, Hobo, which is the same as skateboarders and which gives them a clear identity amongst other unicyclists. This does demonstrate how consumption forms a part of the subculture.

While many young unicyclists do adopt a Hobo style of dress, more of them choose clothing, (t-shirts or hoodies specifically), which link them to unicycling by logos or brands. This demonstration of identity and subculture through dress is not exclusive to unicycling, of course, and Siegenthaler and Gonzalez recognise it in youth sport generally:

*Young athletes delight in identifying with their sport. They wear their uniforms and team jackets with pride, not only to games, but also to restaurants, school and even to bed ... and wear T-shirts that identify them as participants in a particular sport. (Siegenthaler and Gonzalez, 1997, p.303)*

T-shirts or hoodies showing allegiance to a particular unicycle discipline, role model or club are an important visual element of the subculture. T-shirts indicating attendance at a certain national or international meet are used to demonstrate Bourdieu's cultural capital by those who wear them.

An additional element of the subculture of unicycling and some specific disciplines within it, including Trials, is the emphasis on danger or risk which I have referred to elsewhere in this thesis. Wheaton identifies this as a key element in the subculture of any lifestyle sport:

*Danger and excitement are embraced in the “go for it attitude” that characterizes many lifestyle sport activities, sports that often challenge restrictions based on safety. (Wheaton, 2007, p.298)*

Risk is a strong element in cycling, which unicycling has developed out of; Albert views it as being “normalised” by cyclists so that it has become “an everyday expected element of the sport” (1999, p.157.) This is true of unicycling too; when Trials riders are observed on the verge of a severe drop, of risky height, they appear to give no consideration to the severity of what they are about to do, but instead view it as a normal part of their chosen sport. This example is illustrated in the following story which seeks to identify something of the subculture of unicycling.

In this chapter I have explored various theoretical approaches to subculture and discussed some research findings that relate to youth and sport subcultures as a framework to explore the subculture of unicycling. Sangay’s story follows next and I use it to illustrate a number of elements of unicycling sub-culture.

## Chapter 13



### International Interest - Sangay’s Story

#### Introduction

#### Sources and Contexts

I have placed Sangay’s narrative here as it illustrates various elements of subculture discussed in the previous chapter with regard to unicycling and specifically Street riding. Sangay runs a unicycle club for young people and came to be known to me through the *Uni* magazine and then personal contacts, just as in the story. He was 19 when I interviewed him and had been riding for four years. Sangay’s identity has developed from being a unicyclist to being effectively the leader of a unicycle club. This was obvious from my interactions with him and observations of him. In telling his story the club has great significance. Therefore his narrative draws on the experience of several riders, although Sangay is the main character on which it is based. It is reconstructed from data gathered in a one-to-one interview with Sangay, a focus group with some of the riders in his club, and several hours of observations of him and club members riding and interacting with each other and with Jack, a foreign rider who visits the club. My construction of this story does then meet the criteria for ethnographic fiction (Sparkes, 2002) discussed earlier as it is based on real events at which I have been present. Although all those who participated spoke English, but their levels of fluency varied as they were operating in a second or third language. Their dialogue was therefore not as detailed as in the data for other stories and so I placed more emphasis on observations. This was possible as I spent a whole day with the club. Sangay’s own English was very good; he was articulate and confident and keen to talk about his unicycling and the club, showing great pride in it. Finally, in addition to the conversations with the unicyclists I had an email

dialogue with the school’s director, although she was not present when I visited.

At interview Sangay described himself as a very motivated individual, something supported by comments from the school director. Interestingly he did talk of members of his club who were less motivated academically, as did the director.

### **Voice and Authenticity**

The narrative account draws closely on Sangay’s personal experiences and thoughts as he told them in the interview, although these were not as detailed as with other interviewees. I have paraphrased some of his own words and phrases from the transcript, with one or two presented verbatim. I have rewritten some of his thoughts and speech, being careful not to change the meaning, but to enhance the fluency and therefore the flow of the story. His fluency in English, or that of the club members, has no significance to the story itself, only to the collection of data on which it draws. Sangay has read the story and expressed his satisfaction with it; he responded to say that he could see himself in it.

In reflecting on my influence on the story as the researcher, I had not met Sangay before visiting his club. He had had recent and extensive email dialogue with Jack, my husband, but I don’t think my relationship to Jack had any particular significance to Sangay. We were all members of the unicycling community and thus had a common bond, something that united us, a shared interest that made conversation easy.

Despite changing the names of people involved and the club, that of the country has not been changed. Sangay is comfortable with this and we have discussed possible implications via email. Anonymity is less important in this story as it has far less personal information in, nor does it suggest individuals’ vulnerabilities as some of the others have, thus requiring anonymity. Indeed,



for Sangay and his club the international interest shown in it by both the *Uni* magazine – something in the story based on reality – and by this research project is welcomed, as it acknowledges the club and its members, thus providing an extended identity as members of an international community to those involved.



## International Interest - Sangay's Story

They rode round and round in circles and figures of eight, riding fast to try and catch each other then slow, catching their breath, backwards sometimes, or bunny hopping up and down the steps every few minutes. Two lads, best mates, 15 year olds, dressed in low waisted, baggy, faded combat trousers. Too warm to wear hoodies. One had a washed-out black shirt with red flames on it, the other a scruffy old 'Animal' t-shirt, at least one size too big. Flames wore a beanie hat and Animal had a battered baseball cap on back-to-front. They circled round and round, listing over as they rode to catch additional speed; an old transistor radio on the ground, pumping out some local station, rock music at full volume. Then they'd stop and twist, practising a 360 degree spin on the spot. Animal could only do about 180 degrees but Flames was almost all the way round.

It was a typical unicycling scene; a couple of friends practising together, urging each other to go faster, or higher, or further, depending on what the goal was, usually boys, young lads mostly, just like Flames and Animal, in their teens, riding Street or Trials. The baggy trousers, hanging low, were a trademark style for male, adolescent unicyclists, borrowed from the skateboarding and BMX cultures they sometimes rode with. Usually a hoodie was worn on top, typical youth subculture today, anti-establishment almost given the menacing, negative stereotypes of hooded youth in the media. Without a hoodie on, shirts had to be cool, like Flames' and Animal's. You were making a statement after all, even if you didn't realise it. Unicycling was cool and you had to look cool, look the part – it was the same wherever you were. Something about riding on one wheel, the feeling of being different, unique, you had to look the part; it just went with the riding. The websites, official and unofficial, kids posting photos and videos of their tricks online, all reinforced it as part of the subculture. The images in the few magazines that took any interest in it fuelled it too. Unicycling was cool and if you rode you were cool (or whatever the latest youth expression was – 'mint'?). It was the same wherever you were, all part of the universal unicycling male, youth subculture. Of course that was how lots of adolescents dressed today

anyway, the larger youth culture, mainstreamed now to some extent. Still, Animal and Flames knew they looked cool and were happy to be so. They knew the look they wanted and had scoured all the secondhand stalls to achieve it – their meagre clothing allowance being spent creatively. They'd been on Facebook and YouTube, websites of Kris Holms and others. They weren't really interested in the speed or long distance practical clothes, which didn't look cool, and anyway they wouldn't have found those second-hand locally. Instead they had studied their contemporaries on the internet, other young lads, pictured with their mates, doing their thing on a uni and looking cool at the same time!

There was a new post on YouTube, a French lad, Francois; he was riding off the roof of a building, a good three metres high Animal reckoned. It had a flat roof; Francois rode along it and stopped close to the edge. His friends were on the ground shouting up to him, encouraging him, goading him, whistling, clapping. He took very small hops getting closer and closer to the edge, then paused. His friends fell silent and Francois hopped off the edge. He kept his body upright but bent his torso forward slightly, his feet on the pedals still, his arms out to balance. He landed upright and on his uni still and rode off screen. His mates applauded. "Mon dieu!" "Fantastique!" Francois rode back on screen; the film was a bit shaky as the cameraman, presumably one of his mates, got him back in the viewfinder. He beamed with satisfaction and gave one of the spectators a high five slap. He was cool, he looked cool, baggy jeans and a faded t-shirt, 'Koxx'. Animal and Flames had come across Koxx on the internet too; a French company that made unicycles and had some amazing clips of tricks on their website. Yogi, he was in a lot of the Koxx clips. He usually rode bare-chested, his long hair tied back in a pony tail. He looked really cool but the friends knew they wouldn't get away with that look here! Francois was certainly impressive with his amazing drop – what a feat, they wished they could do that. But after that clip were several seconds of Francois on other attempts to hop off the roof. Each time he had not made it; he'd fall on landing – sometimes pretty hard, "Ouch!" – or he'd land on his feet, his unicycle crashing to the ground nearby. Animal and Flames watched the successful drop over and over again.



Illus. 24: Animal and Flames watched the successful drop over and over again.

They often spent the evening in the IT lab on unicycle websites, assuming there was electricity of course. They were thrilled to watch others do tricks, they gave them ideas, showed them what was possible. Most of it was unbelievable, but it gave them something to work towards. They had been riding for a year themselves, had started together and helped each other to learn. They had literally taken it in turns to hold each other up until they no longer needed each others' physical support but they were best mates and so they supported each other anyway, encouraging, watching and giving feedback, just riding together. It was more fun with two. Some of the others rode too, quite a few now, but they weren't as good as Flames and Animal. They had even surpassed Sangay but then they did practise far more than anyone else, too much their teachers sometimes said. They'd been in trouble a few times for not doing their homework. Well they had been so engrossed in mastering a new trick that they had not realised the time and the evening had just gone. Still, you were supposed to be a bit of a rebel if you unicycled, it went with the "I don't care what anyone thinks of me" attitude and they were not bad kids really; they were just more motivated to unicycle than to study. They struggled in class anyway, not naturally clever they had to work hard.

They had done in the past, in their junior years but they were just running out of enthusiasm now, demotivated you could say, not by any desire to be difficult, they’d just gradually lost interest and fallen behind. Sangay tried to keep an eye on them, (he was a school assistant now his own studies were completed), making sure the unicycling didn’t distract them from school work. It was supposed to help, not hinder.

They’d only been practising the spins last month, just ten minutes here and there, whenever they got the chance. They’d been struggling with the spins but Sangay had suggested they go online to get some tips. They’d found some on Facebook and watched an American lad, Karl, do 360-degree spins. They’d played it over and over again. It was the first time they’d seen any unicycling on the internet. It was a Tuesday evening, that first time, they remembered it well. They had never seen anything like it, never imagined anything like it. They watched it over and over again until the power went off; there was always load-shedding on Tuesdays. Still, watching Karl had given them some tips, how to use their arms to add momentum. Karl looked cool too, same baggy trousers.

“Hey, perhaps we could post on the internet!” Animal suggested now as they sat on the steps having a quick break. It was really starting to heat up again here and after the cooler winter they had to get used to the midday heat again.

Flames laughed, “Post! Us! What of?”

“Well, you doing a spin, you’re almost all the way round.”

“Yer, but that’s no big deal. Loads of riders can do that. Now if it was a double or triple 360, others can do that too I know, but at least it’s quite impressive.”

“Well, you’d better keep practising then,” replied Animal somewhat dejected by his friend’s apparent put-down. “It doesn’t have to be a really amazing trick,” he pointed out. “Loads of kids just post themselves having a go; it’s just for fun.”

“Yer, but who’d be interested in us, riding over here?”

“Other unicyclists, it’s just like us watching them. They’re just kids like us.”



"They're nothing like us!" responded Flames abruptly now, this idea was tiring him. Who'd be interested in their riding, they couldn't even do any cool tricks yet.

"They are like us, look at them!" shouted Animal crossly. "It doesn't need to be video. We could borrow the school camera and post some photos, us and our unicycles. That's the whole point of Facebook and stuff. We could post on that unicycle forum, there are loads of photos on there, not tricks necessarily, just riders hanging out. We looked through them the other week. Remember?" The photos were mostly just kids hanging out. "Oh, come on, it'd be cool. No-one here has ever done that. It'd be so cool. We'd be famous!" he laughed.



Illus. 25: We could borrow the school camera and post some photos, us and our unicycles.

"It would have to be an impressive photo, a difficult trick or something. A high drop like the French rider ... hey, off the old storeroom roof!" Flames was interested again, the idea of having his skills seen by other riders appealed to him; he had to admit that - especially as no-one else here had posted.

"We'd better keep practising then!" laughed Animal as he rose to his feet. He reached down towards his friend and grabbed his beanie hat off his head. He picked up one of the unicycles laying on the ground and jumped on, riding off at speed. Flames laughed and grabbed the other one, chasing after Animal.

They rode round and round the outside of the basket ball court and across the half-size football pitch. There were short cranks on both unis so their legs went round and round ever so fast.

“Hey, you've got to ride better than that if you're gonna post yourself on the internet,” teased Animal.

“I could catch you anytime, I'm just being kind to you!!” taunted Flames.

“Oh yer, game on!” Animal pedalled even faster, Flames close behind him. He zigzagged back across the football pitch to the basketball court and wove in and out of the monks practising their baskets. They were dressed in their uniform maroon robes but, as usual with young monks, they looked somewhat dishevelled, less than regulatory, the folds in their robes uneven, yellow or orange t-shirts poking out from underneath. The brightly coloured t-shirts making as much of an individual statement as Flames' and Animal's t-shirt and shirt, within the strict dress code confines of Buddhism. The monks scowled at the two young friends as they got in their way, riding in and out of them, chasing madly.

They rode towards the storeroom, towards the huge painting of Buddha on the side wall, Buddha sitting under a rainbow, a white dove on each side, lotus flower in hand, his eyes closed in meditation. Behind the perimeter wall, hundreds of brightly coloured prayer flags hung between the buildings; there was a large Tibetan community here, living in exile. Behind the rooftops the Himalayas poked up skywards, their snow-capped tips glistening in the sun, against a blue, cloudless sky. Flames reached out and caught hold of Animal's arm, he pulled him, somewhat harder than he meant to and they both fell off, landing on top of each other in a heap, the unis crashing to the ground loudly, causing the monks to look over at the noise. The two friends laughed raucously and wrestled each other, enjoying the closeness of their friendship. It was a scene that was repeated in countless other places, friends united by their unicycling, young lads high on the adrenalin of riding and friendship, fooling around between stunts and tricks; the dress, the age, the gender, the music, the tricks, all part of the subculture, the same, and yet this scene was unique, different, unusual and yet usual. Animal and Flames belonged to the Everest Unicycle Club at the Everest Boarding School in



Kathmandu, Nepal. It was the only unicycle club in Nepal, the only unicycling club on the Indian subcontinent as far as they knew, as far as Sangay knew, unique and yet the same as so many other clubs in so many other countries. The same unis, the same kids with the same looks and the same goals, motivated by the same challenges, only the backdrop was different. You could have picked up the kids and the unis and put them down in Manchester, on a Tuesday night when the Denton Unicycle Club met at the local comprehensive school, using the playground as a practice space. They wouldn't have looked out of place and would have been left to get on, as was the norm at local clubs the world over: ride as an individual, do your own thing, but within a group, something to be part of but with no pressure, no formality, just a shared space and like-minded attitude. It was the informality and lack of regulations that appealed to many club members.

Of course some clubs were more formal than others, with riding much more directed. Take the Twin Cities Unicycle Club in the States, for example. That went in for lots of large group formation sequences as did the Toyoda Club in Japan. The LUNIs of the London Club always devoted all their club meets to unicycle hockey. So yes, there were differences; each club had its own preferences, dictated by the members of the moment. It wouldn't have been unicycling if they had all been the same, and yet they were united by a shared culture, unwritten, not even acknowledged by the riders, certainly not noticed by outsiders. It had just developed and the Everest Unicycle Club was one of the newest groups to join this international community, to be part of this shared culture.

The club had been running for just over a year now; Animal and Flames were two of its most long standing members! The Everest Boarding School was a residential school for children and young people from remote Everest and wider Himalayan regions. They were mostly Nepalis with some Tibetans, Indian and even Bhutanese; Animal and Flames were both Nepali. Like many pupils there they had been sent to the school when they were quite young - Animal was seven and Flames was only four but his older sister was already there. The school had a lot of international support, its mission of providing

high quality education while maintaining the Himalayan cultures was popular with wealthy foreigners, particularly American sponsors. Pupils were taught the usual school subjects, along with the Tibetan language, including calligraphy and Tibetan art, and now those who wanted it were also taught unicycling!



Illus. 26: The Everest Unicycle Club was one of the newest groups to join this international community, to be part of this shared culture.

Each year a group of health practitioners came from the USA to check the children out and work with the staff on health awareness and preventative provision. For the last three years the dentist, Craig, who had come with the group had done various shows for the pupils, largely to keep them entertained while they were waiting to be seen by the medics. With over 1,000 pupils there were a lot of kids to check out! He had an interest in circus arts and always travelled with a good range of props, including juggling balls, diabolos, swallowable knives and a unicycle. The children had been entranced naturally. As with many other circus artists Craig was not hugely accomplished on a unicycle, using it more to enhance other routines; knife swallowing while idling on one wheel took on another dimension! Still, his unicycling had intrigued many of the pupils as they had never seen a one

wheeled bike before! Then last year, Alex had arrived from Australia. He was a volunteer, a young man on a gap year after graduating from university. He came out to the school for six months to teach English. He was a keen mountain unicyclist and the thought of being without his beloved uni for six months, particularly whilst surrounded by amazing mountains, meant that he had just had to bring it with him. As a young western man he had quickly attracted the interest and attention of young lads at the school. He was cool and they idolised him from the beginning, but when he rode his uni round the playground for the first time, swooping in and out of the little kids, hopping up the hall steps and jumping off the waist high wall around the office veranda, his god-like status was secured. Sangay was 17 at the time, a school prefect, assured and confident. With his fluent English he had been asked by the principal to help Alex settle in, to show him around the campus and the local area.

With only a few years between them they had struck up an instant relationship and it was only a matter of time before Sangay asked for a go on Alex's uni. Alex had laughed, "Of course!" He had brought it out for himself to ride; it hadn't even crossed his mind that the pupils might be interested to ride it but Sangay had been determined from when he first watched Alex on it. His interest had been caught by Craig in previous years but what Alex could do on it was just so cool; it looked very special. When you were one of 1,000 pupils at a boarding school you had to find ways to be an individual, do something different, stand out from the crowd. He had instantly been determined to learn, motivated by the challenge, like so many before him, wherever they learnt, in South Korea, New Zealand, Canada or Holland.

Sangay was one of the first to learn at the school, to be able to ride unsupported. At the beginning there was only Alex's unicycle so you had to be quite tall to even have a go and of course, with only one you didn't get that much practice on it. Alex was outside at the weekend riding down from Nagarkot on it, or back from Bhaktapur, exploring the foothills of the Himalayas. He let one or two of the older lads practise on it of an evening though, and Dawa was the first girl to show an interest. She was a good friend

of Sangay's, and it became a competition between the two of them to see who would ride unsupported first. They agreed a distance of ten metres and there had to be at least two witnesses; it was serious stuff. Dawa was a good gymnast with excellent balance, so although Sangay often begged Alex to let him practise for 10 minutes at night round the back of the teaching block when everyone else was in bed, it was Dawa who could ride first. Alex was delighted by the interest the kids showed in the unicycle and emailed his club in Canberra to ask friends there to send out a unicycle. They had a few old spare unicycles which belonged to the club and so they sent out two of these. Alex, Dawa and Sangay were delighted, as were the other learners. Next time the American medics came out Craig was so impressed by the determination, perseverance and enthusiasm that he left behind his old, 5 ft Giraffe - well, he hardly rode it and it gave them something else to practise on even if it was a bit beyond them as yet!

Alex's six months were over quickly but on his departure the principal asked Sangay to set up a unicycle club to keep the children's interest going. It was another activity for them and was, no doubt, good for their physical development and health. So the Everest Unicycle Club was born. Like so many before it, based on the enthusiasm and commitment of just one or two riders. It would catch the imagination and determination of young people in the community, in this instance, the school community - who, like Sangay, were looking for something a bit different. Animal and Flames had been two of the first to join. They had only the two unicycles and a Giraffe (but you couldn't learn on that - you had to be able to ride unsupported before you rode one, however high the saddle was) so a rota was drawn up with five or six names practising each evening on a twice weekly schedule. It was difficult for the kids at first, but they were all friends and they showed each other, encouraged each other. When someone fell down, someone else picked them up, often watching each other even if it wasn't their night to ride. Even the smallest achievement was exciting and motivating; it made them all persevere. One or two lost interest, but that was the norm; it was harder than it looked and not everyone wanted to persevere. Some of the teachers took a bit of an interest,



asked their pupils about it if they were learning, but it was left to Sangay to encourage them and sort them out.



Illus. 27: It was difficult for the kids at first, but they were all friends and they showed each other, encouraged each other.

A year on, there were about 30 members, all able to ride to some degree. Some, like Animal and Flames, were quite skilled and were developing their tricks, had really become hooked by it, encouraged by Sangay. Their success motivating them further, indeed some teachers had even noticed and commented to Sangay. The school principal had asked him to try to involve those who were “weak in their studies”. Some of the teachers had noticed that these pupils, those who were hard to engage, like Animal and Flames, who had learnt to unicycle, were “a little bit encouraged in their studies afterwards”.

“Hey Sangay, you do a great job with those unicyclists,” one of the Tibetan language teachers had told him once. “That unicycle thing is very good!”

He was really proud of the work he had done with some of the riders. Animal and Flames, particularly, they were so enthusiastic and, although only a couple of years older than them, he got great pleasure from seeing their satisfaction, how pleased they were with themselves. It satisfied him, knowing

he had played even a small part; he sensed their pride. They felt proud of themselves, he thought; learning how to unicycle was not so easy and it was new to many people, especially outside of the school compound. If you could ride you were special. He smiled to himself - he was special and so were the rest of the club members. There was a photo of them hanging on one of the school noticeboards. Alex had sent it to them; it was from a small article about the club in the *Uni* magazine that Alex had written back in Australia; it even named Sangay as the club organiser. "Look at that!" Sangay often said to himself when he passed the noticeboard. "Me and the Club in an international magazine – international interest in us!"

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In England, Jack was a regular reader and contributor to the *Uni* magazine. It was edited by a friend of his who was always pleased to get interesting stories. It was a big undertaking to publish a magazine dedicated to unicycling four times a year; you needed a lot of contributions, and Jack always had an interesting story to tell. He was a keen unicyclist, one of the top UK riders probably. He had ridden all over the world: Peru, New Zealand, China, Canada, Nepal as it happened. That was why he was so surprised to read about the Everest Unicycle Club in Kathmandu in the magazine. He visited Nepal almost annually and always took his unicycle, had even been in the Nepali newspapers a couple of times about his riding there, but had no idea that the club existed. How exciting! He would have to visit it on his next trip. So he emailed the editor who passed him on to Alex who passed him on to Sangay. That was the great thing about emails and the internet; unicyclists were a widespread community and now they could keep in touch, make new friends. The internet played an important part in unicycling culture. It facilitated a sharing of ideas and enabled the development of the sport around the world. It was particularly important to young people, for many a preferred method of communication. It did enable them to communicate with other young riders, at their own club, in their own country or overseas. It was particularly valued by

those who were lone riders, who didn't have other unicyclists nearby (and this was not unusual). Sangay made good use of it to see what the latest unicycling news was. The internet certainly gave him a whole world of unicycling contacts, tricks to teach the kids, an opportunity to be included in an international community, not to feel isolated but to be a part of something bigger. It was exciting! He had started posting on the forum recently; that had given him a sense of belonging. They weren't major posts; he hadn't started any threads yet, just replied to other people's but he was in dialogue with people around the world.

Jack and Sangay were soon in email contact. Jack told Sangay about his unicycling and his love for Nepal. He was coming out in November. "It'd be great to visit the Club. Would it be OK?"

Sangay was really excited, not only would the kids meet a unicyclist from England who would run a workshop for them, teach them some new tricks, but he was bringing two new unicycles with him – a gift for the club from his Denton Club, he had said – and he was bringing parts to fix their two. They'd carried on riding them as they had no others, but the saddle on one was split and the thread on the cranks of the other was worn. Jack would fix them both; he'd bring out the necessary spare parts if Sangay emailed him a photo of each unicycle to show what was needed. That would be great – they'd been down to only one that was really rideable and that was the Giraffe. Now they'd have five. With more than 30 pupils in the club now there was a lot of demand for them.

\* \* \*

Sangay had arranged to meet Jack by the main road. The school was in a maze of narrow streets and an outsider would never find it. Jack would get a taxi and get out at an agreed spot. Sangay would recognise him 'cause he'd have unicycles with him – now that wasn't a sight you saw every day in



Kathmandu! He took Flames and Animal with him, to help him push them back. Jack would have his own with him too; he was going to give the Club a demonstration and run the workshop. A battered maroon cab pulled in at the side of the road and out got a tall, blonde, long haired foreigner. He was wearing a Unicycle.com t-shirt and baggy combat shorts – it had to be Jack, it was obvious, even before he got the unis out of the boot! Animal and Flames just couldn't help themselves. "Namaste!" they shouted excitedly. "Wow!" as they took the two new unis and jumped on them. Both were shiny blue with silver flames on the stems like Francois. They were pretty much the right height and they rode a short distance up the road before turning round and riding back grinning from ear to ear, dodging the pedestrians who looked on in amazement. A unicyclist on the street was a rare sight in most countries; in Nepal it was virtually unseen, even in the area round the school, as the pupils mostly kept to their compound.

The time with Jack went quickly, but Sangay was delighted with things. Feeling responsible for setting it up, he relished the enjoyment of the club members as they showed Jack round the school, then sat and watched him, engrossed, as he fixed the two old unis. While he was fixing them they took it in turns to ride the new unicycles, those whom they fitted. Once he had fixed the old ones Jack cut down one of the seat frames on a new uni so the saddle would go lower and the pair would fit a wider range of riders. They sat on the hall steps and watched him as he rode round the basketball court doing a few tricks. Even the young monks sat and watched, mesmerised by his effortless riding. Neither Street nor Freestyle were Jack's chosen disciplines; he was a speed and distance rider both on and off road, but his basic unicycling skills were excellent so he idled and wheel-walked effortlessly. "OK, your turn now!" he called, "Show me what you can do." They took it in turns, each concentrating hard, keen to show the best that they could do.

Some were still beginners and needed help to stay upright. Jack offered them some advice and showed a couple who were having trouble free-mounting what to do. Others could pedal backwards or do small bunny-hops. Jack showed them how to wheel-walk; that was a new trick for all of them. "Any

questions, anyone?" he asked, "Any of you want to learn something particular? I'll see if I can help!"



Illus. 28: They took it in turns, each concentrating hard, keen to show the best that they could do.

"Yer, me!" called out Flames. "I want to drop off that roof. I've seen someone do it on the internet!" He pointed over to the storeroom and the Buddha painting.

"That's quite a drop!" exclaimed Jack. "You'd have to be careful; wear a helmet. It'd take a lot of practice and you need to start on much smaller drops. Can you jump off the top of the steps?"

"Yer, easy" replied Flames and he demonstrated.

"Well done!" encouraged Jack. "You've got a good posture – I mean you hold your body well, up straight, that's good, just lean forward slightly. I think that roof is too high, you could hurt yourself if you fell badly."

"I'm gonna practise and practise! Then I'm gonna post a photo of me doing it on the Forum!"

"If you can do that I'll take your photo and get it on the front of the Uni magazine!" Jack teased.

"Hey, cool!" laughed Animal.

“If you really are serious”, said Jack, “then practise on one of the new unis. The stems are much stronger than the old ones and will take your weight from that height.” (About five feet, he reckoned.) “You need to let quite a lot of air out of the tyre so that it can absorb the bounce. But you must be careful; unicycling can be dangerous if you mess around!”

“I’ll watch him,” said Sangay, knowing that the principal would not be impressed if he saw the boys on the storeroom roof, let alone up there with a unicycling or jumping off it!

“Look, I’m here for six weeks,” Jack told them. “In fact I’m going to unicycle from Lhasa to Kathmandu. No-one has ever unicycled at that altitude before so I’m hoping to set a record.” There were gasps of amazement all round. “I’ll come back before I fly home and see how you’re all getting on – if that’s OK with Sangay.”

“Yer, great!” Sangay replied enthusiastically. “Thanks, thanks!” He felt proud to be running the club, to be part of the group at the school and now to be part of a bigger group, an international community with a shared culture and identity. It felt good. It was cool. Unicycling was cool. The club he ran was cool.

\* \* \*

Jack did indeed come back to the club. He kept his word and everyone showed their progress. He and Sangay agreed to keep in touch by email after that and they did.

About three months later Sangay had an email in his in-box from ‘unicycle.jack’. The subject was ‘UNI magazine’. He clicked on it excitedly.

*I hope you like the attached. I'll put some copies of the magazine in the post to you. Now you and the Everest Unicycle Club have been in two editions of the magazine - pretty good! Say "Hi" to everyone for me.*

Sangay double clicked on the attachment and a scanned picture of the magazine’s latest cover opened up. It was an A4 size photo of the Buddha painting, the Himalayas reaching up in the background behind it. On one side of the painting was Sangay and on the other side was Animal. They were both looking into the centre and slightly upwards. Dropping down off the roof and frozen in mid-air by the camera was Flames, on track for a perfect landing and wearing Jack’s old helmet! Sangay smiled to himself. The front cover, now that really was international interest!

## Chapter 14

### Hopping Down the School Steps – Valuing Alternative Youth Interests in School

Hopping down steps while staying upright on a unicycle is a popular pastime with young male riders. It looks cool and there are always steps somewhere nearby when you are out in the street with your mates. It is relatively easy to do compared to many tricks and so is another popular goal with new riders as they develop their skills. Pete recalled in his interview how he and the Guys had hopped up and down the sports hall steps at school, enjoying the shared activity, the comradeship, but perhaps more importantly, the interest shown by the teachers who saw them do it! To continue the metaphor of learning to unicycle and undertaking PhD, hopping down the steps could be seen as working through each of the different stages of the PhD, writing the proposal, reviewing the literature, selecting a methodology, gathering data and so on. My confidence, like that of new riders, has grown with each step successfully accomplished.

My thesis is concerned with the identity of young unicyclists at different levels of engagement in the education system. All those whose stories I have told see unicycling, to varying degrees, as an important part of their identity, (with the exception of Jon whose story follows this chapter). Considering the difficulty of this sport and the perseverance required to become a competent rider, most of the individuals here have demonstrated a high level of motivation, of self-belief and of diligence to achieve set goals; the processes they have each gone through to master unicycling has positively influenced their self-esteem. I have seen such great energy and enthusiasm in the young riders as I have listened to their stories and watched their achievements. At the beginning of my story, my doctoral journey, I assumed that they shared their passion and success with their teachers. What school wouldn't want to harness such high levels of motivation, to help build the individual's self-esteem and seek a way to use the positive energy in the classroom?

However, it became apparent to me that this was not the case; some teachers knew, some didn't, but those who did were not really perceived by the young riders to be interested. Perhaps they were too busy planning how to get their pupils to achieve the required level in the next round of standardised assessment, or perhaps they were too busy struggling to fit the National Curriculum into the school day and didn't have time. In this chapter I explore the notion of curriculum in England at the moment and the current emphasis on pupil outcomes that can be measured. I then discuss alternative curricular models and the rationale behind them and in doing so consider if there is a place for unicycling in any curriculum. While my focus is unicycling, schools could in fact promote any worthwhile activity which motivates either groups or individuals as it is about valuing and then harnessing whatever it is that motivates a young person in order that he or she may achieve.

## The Curriculum

There are two definitions of curriculum given by Alexander (2001). The *narrow* definition regards curriculum as "content, subject matter or outcomes" (p.574). The *imperialist* definition views curriculum far more broadly "as everything the school does in pursuit of its goals", (p.574) a view which grew out of American and English universities during the 1960s and the 1970s. Bartlett and Burton recognise that it is the narrow view of curriculum which is currently adopted in English schools and which replaced the more liberal imperialist curriculum. This shift in approach to the school curriculum was brought about, they suggest, by government concern over what was happening in classrooms:

*The curriculum and standards of teaching were increasingly placed under the spotlight. There was concern about what was being taught to pupils, the teaching methods employed, which were seen as too progressive, and the increasing indiscipline which was apparently occurring in schools. (Bartlett et al., 2001).*

*The curriculum issue was "solved" by removing control of what was taught away from the teachers through the introduction of a national curriculum from 1988 onwards. Teaching methods became greatly influenced by the need to ensure that pupils achieved good results in*

*the National Curriculum assessments, especially since league tables of school performance were published. (Bartlett and Burton, 2003, p.4)*

Preedy (2001) suggests three dimensions to the curriculum as defined in the narrow sense and illustrated by the National Curriculum. These are:

- the intended curriculum – what is planned;
- the offered curriculum – what teachers teach;
- the received curriculum – what pupils actually experience.

While there may be some differences between these three dimensions, all are clearly dictated by the National Curriculum at present and so there is currently little opportunity for teachers to be flexible in their lesson content. Indeed Hill (2006) describes the National Curriculum as Eurocentric and traditionalist, which suggests little room for creativity. Out-of-lesson activities - the extra-curriculum - once provided space for alternative activities and greater creativity and spontaneity. However, as teachers have felt the pressures of additional bureaucracy required by a national curriculum and related standardised assessment, time and energy to provide extra-curricular activities has diminished.

The introduction of the National Curriculum in 1988 paved the way for standardised assessments of what pupils had learnt from the intended curriculum. The government was keen to introduce national testing at various stages of compulsory schooling to ensure that it had been successful in taking educational control away from teachers and, in its eyes, raising educational standards which would be assessed by academic achievement. In Brown's view (2002) education came to define "the needs of children in terms of the perceived social, economic and commercial skill-requirements of society", (p.28). Preedy summarises this shift in educational power created by a standardised, centralised curriculum:

*Recent years have seen increasingly centralised curriculum control in England and Wales, with a shift in the balance of power away from schools and LEAs in favour of central government. On the other hand, many European countries, especially the Nordic ones, and the USA, have experienced a*



*contrary movement with increasing decentralisation of the curriculum (Maden, 2000; Peck and Ramsey, 1998). However whether they have moved towards or away from central government curricular control, most European countries, including England and Wales, have seen the development of centralised educational standards, statistical and inspection agencies, which seek to monitor and enhance standards of pupils' performance across the educational system. The growth of these central agencies has been prompted largely by national concerns about maintaining and increasing educational standards in order to compete and survive in the global market place. (Preedy, 2001, p.90)*

Brown acknowledges the “important connections between the quality of the education young people receive and their subsequent employment prospects” (p.76). While there is a clear need for countries to have high educational standards for the growth of society and individuals, the current focus is arguably too much on measurable outcomes (such as ‘knowledge’), rather than on processes (such as learning), or qualities (such as respect). Preedy goes on to acknowledge this as a problem of the current education system:

*However, in the current context, there is a danger of focussing too much on external requirements to demonstrate rising standards and hence on a product-based approach, and a view of evaluation as a largely rational and straightforward process. This may lead to a neglect of equally important but harder to measure process factors. (Preedy, 2001, p.95)*

What are these “equally important but harder to measure process factors” (p.95) that Preedy refers to? One group of educational professionals from an English secondary school, when considering their own context, defines them thus:

*All schools should be working towards developing pupils' self-esteem, because this is the foundation of good self-advocacy. Pupils who can build up positive self-image, with an awareness of their skills and worth, and who learn to cope with negative experience, are far better able to be assertive about their needs and choices. (Otten, 1999, p.95)*

I support such a view with its focus on self-esteem and positive self-image rather than academic achievement as defined by the National Curriculum. In

our current context, at the start of the twenty-first century with an emphasis on economic growth and industrial development, based largely on the notion that economic wealth provides happiness at a national and personal level, the education system has been significantly influenced by industry with an emphasis on measurability and cost-effectiveness. After discussing the deprofessionalisation of teachers, Bartlett and Burton recognise the impact of industry and the dangers in dismissing teachers' professional cultures:

*Forms of industrial management came to be seen as appropriate for schools. So we have seen the development of management cultures, emphasising cost effectiveness, efficiency and competition, as opposed to professional cultures, which prioritise the development of the individual pupil, social relationships and collegiality. (Bartlett and Burton, 2003, p.127)*

Closely linked to curriculum is assessment; research by Ruddock et al. (1996) recognises the value of national assessments for some pupils, in that it focuses them, enhancing levels of motivation. However they acknowledge that this is not so for all pupils and so, while motivating some, the National Curriculum and its supporting standardised testing actually demotivates others:

*It seems that motivation can be enhanced through the focussing power of national assessment, which underlines the seriousness of attainment: the rewards are clearly understood by pupils ... However, it doesn't work for like that for all pupils; those who think for whatever reason that they have very little chance of success in examinations and coursework may distance themselves further from their learning. (Rudduck et al., 1996, p.169)*

One of the enduring significances of this research - despite its age - derives from the actual source of the data, the pupils themselves.

Having briefly discussed what is understood by "curriculum" and the focus of our current National Curriculum I will now go on to explore why an alternative curriculum might be needed, at least by some young people.

## An Alternative Curriculum

In my introduction I acknowledged the concern over disengagement of pupils in school. Some pupils are overtly disengaged and this may manifest itself physically in truanting from school; such behaviour is clearly at one extreme end of the engagement continuum I identified in Chapter 3. Less easy to spot, though, and perhaps less far along the continuum but still with severe negative consequences is what Collins (2003) calls “truancy in mind”. She distinguishes this from physical truancy and describes it as a pupil being present in a classroom but not engaged in the activity; the pupil opts out quietly through non-participatory behaviour. She goes on to report a commonly accepted but rather simplistic view of learning in schools where physical presence in a classroom is regarded as synonymous with learning. A small-scale research project by Collins into pupils who truant in mind calls for “a refocusing of attention from simple measures of attendance to more subtle measures of participation in school” (p.215). Some of those whose stories I have told (Pete, Jon and some club members in Sangay’s story) have not been *physical* truants and have not even been disengaged to a high degree but they have at times been *disengaged*, despite their unicycling demonstrating high levels of engagement in a difficult activity with both physical and cognitive challenges.

Montgomery (1998) has written on curriculum provision for disengaged and demotivated pupils. He is concerned with the large number of pupils, often overlooked, who have no cognitive or physical difficulty with learning but who, for other reasons, are not achieving their potential:

*Although children with learning difficulties may be underfunctioning on a wide-scale there appear to be an even larger number without learning difficulties who are also underfunctioning. The reasons for this are often complex and may lead to the accumulation of missed opportunities for learning which can hamper new learning and lead to further difficulties. (Montgomery, 1998, p.24)*

He goes on to recognise the value of using their interests to motivate them and re-engage them; “It is frequently recommended that disaffected pupils’ interests should be the locus for remotivating them and bringing them back into the fold” (p.26). Collins, reflecting on truants in mind, shares Montgomery’s commitment to a curriculum underpinned by pupil interest:

*...offering alternative curriculum experiences would be a good way to reduce truanting in mind behaviour. However, such a curriculum would have to take account of, and respect, the reality of the pupils’ daily-lived experiences. (Collins, 2003, p.214).*

Collins is referring, in part, to activities that pupils choose to engage in outside of school, as part of their daily lives; I call these youth-selected activities. This does not necessarily mean dumbing down the curriculum; indeed, Montgomery stresses the need for such pupils to be cognitively challenged by the curriculum on offer; many physical activities which ostensibly develop particular movement skills do in fact provide cognitive challenges and learning to unicycle is one example of this.

As well as cognitive challenges a curriculum which promotes particular values, such as morals, ethics and citizenship, is no less important. Collins (ibid) acknowledges the importance of respecting young people and teaching values of respect for one’s self and for others as one way of encouraging children to become autonomous. Self-respect, as key to a positive self-identity (discussed in Chapter 10), is often demonstrated in young people’s development of a strong self-esteem and a willingness to take responsibility for how their lives should be lived. Fisher (2000) advocates education for values and a school curriculum underpinned by this. Goggin (2000), (writing in the same volume as Fisher), suggests that these values should include respect for self, respect for others and self-discipline. He goes on to discuss the potential in allowing an individual to explore his or her own needs and interest as a means to respecting the interest of others: “...the logic and power of self-interest should be harnessed to achieve a consensus among young people about a broad set of principles and values” (p.67). My argument

then is for an alternative curriculum which is underpinned by the interests of those individuals in the group, however the group is defined, and not dictated by the government based on measurable outputs, but underpinned by values which promote positive self-esteem and in doing so support the development of relationships, which are a key to effective learning.

What is not being called for here is a wholesale removal of the National Curriculum. Rather what schools should be enabled if not required to consider is flexibility in the curriculum, or in the school day, to generate alternative curricula. I will explore two different approaches to an alternative curriculum of interest to me as unicycling could be incorporated into each, to varying extents. One thing they have in common is recognition of the need to move outside of the formal classroom, as it is traditionally seen.

### **Active Learning Projects**

Bentley (1998) is an advocate of learning beyond the classroom and recognises the need for education for a changing world, that is to say we should review and adapt our education system and its curriculum to meet the needs of our current and future contexts and not remain wedded to out-dated views of education. He promotes “active learning projects” as one model for engaging young people in learning and describes them thus:

*Active learning projects aim to embody approaches which make learning opportunities accessible, but do not limit the potential for achievement. The focus of specific projects, of course, differs enormously, but the common characteristic is that they offer open participation and a potentially unbounded progression through different stages of achievement. The focus of activity relates to wider, longer-term goals, to possible futures, as well as to the more immediate objectives of the exercise. (Bentley, 1998, p.45)*

The longer term goals that he refers to include building confidence and motivation in young people and offering opportunities to those who are or

have been socially excluded. One of the most important features of active learning projects as described by Bentley are that they cross school boundaries and involve pupils in “the worlds beyond their classrooms” (p.46). To him the importance of relationships and personal experience far outweigh the existing formal structure of the current curriculum:

*... placing young people at the centre of networks, rather than fixing them within an institutional framework and feeding information in through its organisational structure. (p.45)*

Bentley is advocating learning opportunities that are open and flexible, not rigidly formulated. This idea is not new; a plethora of writers – among them Rousseau and Isaacs for example - on children and learning have promoted the need for undirected, open-ended and essentially creative opportunities to be given endlessly to young developing minds (Nutbrown *et al*, 2008). What is more progressive in Bentley’s work is the acknowledgement that older pupils can benefit from such an approach too.

## **Adventure Education**

Looking beyond the formal classroom again, Hopkins and Putnam (1993) promote the value of what they call “adventure education”, in developing personal growth. They define adventure activity as an experience that involves uncertainty of outcome and for them takes place largely outdoors, as this increases the level of uncertainty as the teacher and pupils have less control over the outdoor environment than they do inside a fixed classroom. They support the more recent views of Goggin, Fisher and others (presented earlier in this chapter) in that they do not regard education as a process measurable simply by intellectual outcomes. They recognise the importance of intellectual development but consider this alongside moral and social growth for an all round development: “To us education is a process of intellectual, moral and social growth that involves the acquisition of knowledge, skills and experiences” (Hopkins and Putnam, p.6). For them adventure education can contribute to the development of both society and

individuals, in that it is essentially democratic, people have to work together to achieve their goals. As with Bentley's view of alternative curriculum, its emphasis is on active learning and relationships and they promote the following objectives of adventure education: the development of self-knowledge, self-confidence, self-discipline, self-respect, physical capabilities, skills as appropriate to obtain and experience success and a sharpening of sensory perceptions.

I will now explore how unicycling might relate to the two curriculum approaches (active learning projects and adventure education) discussed above.

### **Celebrating Achievement**

Celebrating achievement is vital for developing self-esteem in children and young people. As Bentley (1998) recognises, in relation to active learning, "this is not to suggest that everybody should be rewarded and praised indiscriminately" (p.50). Different children achieve in different areas of the curriculum and some excel in non-curriculum subjects or activities. What is important, I suggest, is for teachers and other significant adults to value all achievement, whatever kind; "Rather it is part of the process of recognising achievement of every kind, and communicating its value" (p.50). This process of recognising and valuing achievement, particularly that which is seen as "alternative", is one which I promote unreservedly. Learning to ride a unicycle is a huge achievement, given the difficulty of the technical and physical task and the strong levels of self-discipline required to accomplish it. If such energy and determination was used for academic achievement in the National Curriculum it would be likely to be well rewarded by teachers. However, as unicycling is not part of the physical education, or even performing arts, curriculum in schools the achievements of many young riders go unvalued, unacknowledged and often unknown. Of course the unicyclists themselves must take some responsibility for this as some choose not to talk about their



unusual hobby in school. However, if the environment and ethos of the classroom was one that valued and respected all individuals, acknowledging diverse interests and abilities and valuing all achievement, regardless of whether it was academic or not, perhaps these young riders would be more willing to share their successes with their teachers and peers. Schools should, therefore, take much of the responsibility for this lack of interest.

### **Unicycling as Part of an Alternative Curriculum**

Schools are increasingly looking for alternative activities for their pupils to participate in, seeking new opportunities for them to be successful. Many of these activities, by their very alternative nature, can appeal where traditional activities might not. Alternative curricula are being adopted in schools and interestingly many of these new curriculum activities are forms of sport. In Glasgow, for example, a group of schools is promoting table tennis in sixteen primary schools and two secondary schools. This is in an attempt “to give pre-teens the chance to lead a successful, fulfilling and healthy life” (Cairns, 2008). Twelve secondary schools across London are piloting free-running, “the sport based on running and leaping over and across buildings and urban obstacles” (Johnson and Wroe, 2009). Like some unicycling disciplines it is about making alternative use of urban spaces, the spaces where young people spend much of their leisure time. It is recognised as having the potential to engage and challenge young people, and to help them manage risk, all of which are elements of unicycling:

*Anything that encourages young people to be active and try new challenges in a supervised environment will help them learn to manage risk ... it tests their limits.” (Johnson and Wroe, 2009, www.independent.co.uk)*

In these examples, although they are valuing alternative activities, indeed alternative sports, the activities have importantly been selected *by the schools* and introduced to the pupils. While this may have value and successfully engage some pupils what is important, in my opinion, is for schools to value

those activities that *pupils have already selected for themselves* and are pursuing as part of their everyday lives outside of school, their lived experiences.

In short what I am promoting here is the need for schools, and therefore teachers, to find time to value activities which are not part of the National Curriculum but which are deeply important to the young people who take part in them, (in this case unicycling). It is quite simply about teachers being enabled if not required to take an active interest in their pupils as individuals with hobbies and experiences outside of the classroom which make them who they are inside the classroom and which impact on academic achievement. This might mean, at one level, talking with pupils about what they do outside of school, or (further along the continuum), asking them to demonstrate their skills in school if they are willing to, or (even further along the continuum), creating opportunities for them to extend these skills in school, perhaps as extra-curricular activities.

The stories I have told here illustrate the positive influence of unicycling on young riders; therefore it should not be necessary to ask why the unicycling achievements of these young people should be valued in school; rather, we should ask but how this might be done. Let us consider unicycling as an active learning project as defined above by Bentley. He describes such projects as ones which “make learning opportunities accessible, but do not limit the potential for achievement” (Bentley, 1998, p.45). Anyone, unicycling instructors insist, can learn to ride a unicycle and indeed this has been borne out by the diverse range of riders observed. Of course you do have to have full mobility, but some with a physical disability could still be part of the unicycling community in a supporting role. Once the rider is able to stay upright the potential is endless and this is one of the significant aspects of the sport. It has many different subdisciplines and individuals can really persevere to achieve as much or as little as they choose to, at their own pace. The young riders in the stories presented here have illustrated this with their different individual goals which they have been motivated to achieve. Thus

unicycling offers “open participation and a potentially unbounded progression through different stages of achievement” (Bentley, p.76), a common characteristic of active learning. In achieving their goals the unicyclists here have acknowledged how the sport has benefited them in other ways, such as staying healthy, being more focussed in their work or feeling more confident; in this way it relates to Bentley’s “wider, longer-term goals” which may have future benefits. Despite it being a sport which is basically an individual activity the stories here have illustrated the different ways in which communities of riders are formed. These communities are significant to individuals as support mechanisms, as the stories have shown, and as such unicycling does create networks and develop relationships, two other important criteria for Bentley. I would suggest then that one way in which unicycling might be part of an alternative curriculum is as an active learning project, perhaps in an after-school club.

I have explored adventure education in this chapter as another form of alternative curriculum, a curriculum which takes place outdoors, beyond the confines of the classroom and school, and so in a space which might be more appealing to some pupils. Unicycling can, of course, be done outside, (as Max and others have shown); but wherever it is done there is an uncertainty of outcome, be it the uncertainty of successfully doing a 360 degree spin for Sangay’s club members or of winning a hockey match for Scott. How it can contribute to the development of both society and individuals has been shown by Scott and his mentor John, as well as being illustrated in some of the other stories; for Pete it provided a strong friendship group. I conclude, given the strong evidence in the stories here, that unicycling can produce the outcomes of adventure education and, indeed values education, by developing self-confidence, self-discipline, self-respect and so on.

Children whose interests, experiences and achievements are valued in the formal classroom - even those which may have occurred in some other place - will have increased self-confidence and an enhanced global self-esteem. This

has the potential to help them re-engage if they were previously disengaged or, to engage at an even greater level:

*Self-esteem enhancement contributes positively towards academic achievement and towards personal and social development.*  
(Lawrence, 2006, p.xvii)

There is much debate within the unicycling community as to whether or not the mainstreaming of the sport, perhaps by including it in a school curriculum, would lose it some or much of its appeal, especially for young riders. This is based on the fact, evidenced in the questionnaire data and focussed interviews, that many people who unicycle are attracted to it and motivated by its unusual nature. If it was mainstreamed this important element of it might disappear. Perhaps what should be encouraged then is not schools adopting it as part of a formal, albeit alternative, curriculum, with lessons for pupils, but simply valuing it in those who already ride or who express an interest in learning. This might be an opportunity to demonstrate skills and tricks or to teach peers. In this instance it is no longer unicycling that is important but any youth-selected activity that is part of an individual's lived experience. As a final conclusion to my study I will give an example from a school that does, indeed, teach unicycling. Interestingly, in this instance, it has not decreased in its appeal as more and more pupils have learnt to ride given the range of disciplines that individuals can pursue once competent.

But what about those who try to learn and who fail to stay upright, who don't persevere and who walk away not being able to unicycle? For every young person who learns to ride there must be countless others who give up. What about any negative influence on them? Jon's story now follows as an example of unicycling being valued in school, and of a pupil who does not excel in it.



## Revolution Rejoice – Jon's Story

### Introduction

### Sources and Contexts

Following the chapter on valuing unicycling in schools, Jon's story is presented here, as his school provided a one-off lesson on it. In this lesson it was not expected that pupils would learn to unicycle competently, unsupported even, but that they would have an experience of something different. The pupils responded so positively and some of them showed such potential to ride unsupported that it was followed up by a series of lessons. Jon chose not to take part in these. Given the positive stories of unicycling presented so far in the narratives and other data the obvious question is "What about the kids who can't do it, who don't learn, who won't persevere?" Surely they must have a negative experience, a sense of failure? Jon's story provides an insight into just such a case and so I attempt to provide something of a balance to the other narratives with it.

Jon's story is based on an hour long observation of one rider, rather than a lengthy interview. It does however draw on data gathered from two conversations I had with him and a detailed interview with his teacher of two years who knew him well. Jon was only 11 and I did not wish to put him under pressure in an interview, but instead thought that he would be more relaxed in a conversation and an observation. I observed him in his first lesson so it was fascinating to see his physical and emotional responses to the task of learning to ride.

I observed Jon in his first unicycle lesson, a lesson set up by his class teacher at school and in which all of his year group, Year 6, participated. I knew the class vaguely, but not the individuals in it before I observed their lesson. What immediately attracted me to Jon as the lesson was being organised was his

negative body language, which suggested low self-esteem and a reluctance to engage in the activity. He was of a broad build, not matched by his height. He did not look athletic and I did not imagine that the hour's lesson would be easy for him. (His teacher later confirmed his low self-esteem.) Given all of the apparent positive influences of unicycling on those who choose to engage and persevere with it, I wanted to see if there was any negative influence on those who were not excited, engaged or successful at it. I anticipated from his body language that Jon might be such, and observed him in detail.

Whilst based on only one person's experience this story, like the others, draws on themes and emotions experienced by other riders, (or in this case, non-riders). The responses of his peers, also observed riding for the first time, are included to demonstrate a variety of responses to the challenge of just staying upright. Jon's teacher used the lesson to engage the class in other activities relating to unicycling, particularly internet searches about the sport and letter writing to the unicycle teacher. I conducted an in-depth interview with her after the project was completed.

Another key figure in the story is the unicycle teacher, Dave. Although he was not specifically observed, because my focus was on Jon, Dave's dynamic interactions with Jon and his classmates were necessarily noted, many of them verbatim. What is obvious again, as with the mentor in Scott's story and the visitor in Sangay's story, is the enthusiasm with which Dave teaches and talks about unicycling and his constant encouragement of the learners. Perhaps this is one of the significant aspects of unicycling for those learning at any level: the ongoing support from other riders.

### **Voice and Authenticity**

This narrative, while being based on an observation rather than an interview with the rider, still presents Jon's voice clearly as I assisted in the lesson and in doing so interacted with him throughout as he clung to a fence in an attempt to stay upright. This interaction allowed me to have a dialogue with him while

observing him. His comments and thoughts voiced in this dialogue are included in the narrative. I then saw him later in the day and a few days later engaged him in conversation about the lesson, encouraging him to reflect on it. I am thus confident that this narrative, whilst somewhat different from the others, yet meets the criteria for creative non-fiction adopted in this study.

In reflecting on my influence on the story as a reflective researcher I do not see any significant impact. Jon was not known to me nor I to him prior to the lesson, other than as a playground mum. I participated in the lesson in the role of a helper, a role I have taken on other occasions at club sessions or meets as a non-riding member of the community.

It has been easy to write a narrative which ensures anonymity for Jon and for his school. A small but increasing number of schools is engaging unicycle teachers to provide either one-off lessons or a series of lessons for pupils; examples of this have been given in the preceding chapter. Jon’s school is not unique in this and therefore Jon is one of a growing number of pupils who has experienced the sport. The completed story has been shown to Jon’s teacher for her approval, to ensure that I have portrayed him in an accurate and fair manner, capturing something of his identity and essence. She described it as a good account of him and of her class. (Interestingly she asked if she could read it to the children and has since reported that they responded very favourably to.)





## Revolution Rejoice – Jon's Story

It was Monday morning, the Monday after SATS week; two weeks until half-term, then back for only six weeks. After the summer it was on to St Michael's Comp; exciting, but a bit scary too. Still, Jon was going to enjoy these last few weeks in Year 6. He was pleased the SATs were over; they'd been fine, he was hoping for Level 5s all round, but it had been a long hard week. Now Mrs Harvey had promised them a reward, something exciting for working so hard. So what would it be? A DVD? Perhaps the new Harrison Ford movie; he wanted to see that. A day of Art; they did that sometimes, a whole day painting or drawing, a particular project; once, they'd had a local artist come in to work with them; that had been good.

"Sarah, will you take the register down please?" Mrs Harvey asked. "Hurry back though; I've got something for you all to watch!"

He'd guessed right, a DVD, great, a nice relaxing morning with a good film. Hope it wasn't too childish; they'd watched Bee Movie last time. It was OK; he liked cartoons but having just turned eleven he craved more adult things now.

"OK class, I'm going to put a DVD on the computer so make sure you can see the whiteboard. Now, you all worked really hard with your SATs last week. I'm really proud of how you got down to it and kept going so positively – well done everyone. I promised you a treat this week, a post-SATs treat, so make sure you can see the whiteboard."

"Is it Harrison Ford, Miss?" Jon called out hopefully.

Mrs Harvey laughed "No Jon, but it's just as adventurous!"

"Is it The Iron Man?!" shouted Peter.

"No, but just as exciting!"

"Is it High School Reunion 2?" Rebecca asked. Oh God, hope not, thought Jon, he couldn't stand all that kissing and those grinning American faces. His sister watched it over and over again at home; it drove him mad, he swore it did.

"No, now everybody ready, be quiet. I want you to watch this carefully; I promised you something exciting and different so here it is."

Loud house music started to play – could be cool, thought Jon. There was a shot of a dark forest. At least it wasn't Bee Movie or High School Reunion. Then the title came up: One Wheel – No Limit! He'd not heard of that film so at least he'd not seen it before. He settled back on his chair; this was going to be good. The camera moved in on a close up of the forest, there was a raised kind of platform made of logs. Strange! The music pumped out. Cool! He folded his arms and got ready for the action. Suddenly a cyclist exploded onto the screen, riding along the narrow, raised platform and dropped off the end. Wicked! He'd dropped about two metres. Jon liked riding his mountain bike in the woods at the back of the estate; he and his mates set up small obstacles but this guy was awesome. As he watched the screen he realised something wasn't right, not as it should be ...

"What's he riding Miss?" Jon heard Thomas call out. "It wasn't a proper bike."

"It's only got one wheel!" Aisha replied.

"That's mental!" shouted Femi.

"Wicked!" agreed Peter.

The man on the one wheeled bike had been followed by two others; they all dropped off the end of the platform and had ridden on through the trees. How did they drop like that and not fall off? It was amazing; how did they stay upright? They'd got no handlebars! How did they do it? They rode on down a steep muddy slope zigzagging in and out of the trees. At the bottom was a narrow stream; they rode towards it, none of them slowing to stop. Instead they each jumped over it. They were still on the saddles, still upright; amazing!

"That is so cool," said Thomas.

"Yer," was the general reply.

The class watched on in silence for a few minutes with the odd gasp or exclamation. There was a different rider now and he was in a shopping centre. He rode round in circles a few times then jumped up some steps – "Wicked! ... God, no! That's impossible!" The rider had jumped up onto a narrow railing, a round hand railing; he rode along it and jumped off the end.

"Bloody hell!" exclaimed Peter.

"Peter!" admonished Mrs Harvey.

The rider rode back to the top of the steps and jumped onto the hand railing going down beside the steps. Instead of putting the wheel on the rail one pedal was flat on top of the rail and he slid down. He jumped off at the end, rode round in a circle again, did a 360 degree spin and rode off camera. Neat! This was a good start to the day!



Illus. 29: ...they all dropped off the end of the platform and had ridden on through the trees.

There was a knock at the classroom door and a tall, lanky man with spiky dark hair walked in wearing cycling gear. Jon knew he'd seen him before and thought for a moment. Yes, in the playground.

"This is Kye's dad," Mrs. Walker said, introducing him to the class. "He's going to teach you to unicycle!"

Jon's heart dropped, he was rubbish at stuff like that, hated doing new things; he'd never be able to do it, he decided instantly.

"Cool!" exclaimed Femi. It was all right for him, he was good at everything, anything new he just got straightaway. He always played centre forward at football. Jon was always put at the back, usually in goal, unless it was a

competition match, then Peter went in goal and Jon was left to do his best in defence. He knew his size didn't help him, that he'd be better at active stuff if he lost some weight. He did try every now and then but his mum always told him he had a sweet tooth and there were always lots of lovely cakes and biscuits in the kitchen cupboard.

"Don't worry!" laughed Kye's dad to the class. "I'm not going to make you do stuff like that!" looking at the screen where the DVD played on. "I'm not quite that good, but we'll get you all up on one, having a go." Jon felt sick. "Anyone can learn to ride one, you just need to balance." Jon felt sicker, he was crap at PE and balancing stuff. Why hadn't Mrs Harvey told them on Friday that this was their surprise? At least he could have bunked off for the day, told his mum he felt sick; well, he did now.

"Has anyone got any questions for Kye's dad before you start?" Mrs Harvey asked. "Do you know what it's called?" she continued.

"It's a unicycle, Miss," answered Stacey. "They ride them in the circus!"

"Well yes, they do," said Kye's dad, "but you saw on the DVD that you can do lots of other things on them. I like riding down mountains on mine and I ride long distance and do some racing; I play a lot of hockey too!"

"What, on your unicycle?" asked Sarah unbelievably.

"Yer!"

"Mint!"

"What's your fastest speed?"

"21 miles an hour."

"Wow!"

"I didn't keep it up for long! I was with a mate on a quiet road with one of those light-up panels that tells you your speed and usually tells drivers to slow down."

"There's one of them near my house!"

"We thought we'd see who could go fastest. I got it up to 21 ..."

"Cool!"

"... but my friend got it up to 23."

"Neat."

“He is the best unicyclist in the UK!”

“How long have you been riding, Dave?”

“About seven years.”

“What made you want to learn?”

“Don’t know really, I just fancied doing something different. It’s good fun – I get lots of attention when I’m out riding.”

“Where do you ride?”

“Anywhere really, all over the place. I ride up and down the by-pass a lot at the moment ‘cause I’m training for a race in Canada next month, but sometimes I ride in the West Moor woods. I’ve ridden in India and Australia.”

“That’s awesome!”

“OK, we’d better get started,” Mrs Harvey interrupted. She clapped her hands for quiet. That caught Jon’s attention, he hadn’t been listening to the questions, he’d been thinking about how awful this was going to be, how humiliating. He wouldn’t be able to do it, he’d just look ridiculous trying to balance on one of those stupid one-wheeled bikes. His stomach really hurt now.

“Right, we’ve split you into three groups. Kye’s dad ...”

“Call me Dave, everyone!”

“... Dave, will take one group at a time. The groups are on the board, now all of you go and put your PE kit on. Jon’s group is first. Hurry up!”

Jon sidled up to his teacher. “I can’t do it Miss, I’ve got stomach ache.”

“Oh Jon, this is such a great opportunity to try something different. Go and get changed, I’m sure you’ll feel better outside.” She glanced over at Dave who was standing nearby and had watched the exchange. “He gets a bit anxious out of his comfort zone,” she whispered.

Dave went out of the fire door into the playground; Ahmed, Stacey, Chloe and Peter hurried behind him to a row of unicycles lined up on the ground. Jon dragged his feet reluctantly to the door. “Come on Jon!” Dave called over encouragingly. He had nowhere to hide!

“Right, we’ve got 45 minutes so you probably won’t get that far. We’re just gonna ride along holding onto the fence; some of you might manage to let go by the end.” Not me, thought Jon. I won’t even be able to sit on it; looks really awkward. A bike with one wheel; how stupid!

“Ok, let’s get each of you sized up on a uni. Stacey, stand next to this please.” Dave fitted them with a unicycle each, adjusting the saddle height and getting them to sit on it. He had saved the one with the thickest tyre for Jon; as he was a big lad Dave knew that would make it a bit easier for him. He hoped Jon wouldn’t notice but he did. ‘The tyre’s thick like me,’ he thought miserably to himself. Dave explained carefully how to set the pedals. “Stand next to the fence with you feet flat on the ground. Pull the seat up between your legs and spin the wheel so the one pedal is at 4 o’clock. Put your foot on the closest pedal. Put both hands on the top of the fence and pull yourself upright onto the saddle putting your weight onto the closer peddle. The wheel might move a little, don’t worry! Put your other foot on the other pedal. He helped each one of them on and up. “Come on Jon!” The other four were all sitting on their saddles holding tightly to the fence but laughing with each other.

“It feels really weird,” said Stacey.

“Yer, it’s all wobbly,” Ahmed laughed.

Jon reluctantly dragged himself to the end of the fence; at least if he went at the back of the line the others wouldn’t be able to watch him.

“Feet flat, pull the saddle up.” Dave stood slightly in front of him and to the left. As Jon pulled the saddle up Dave turned the wheel to get the pedals in the right place. “OK, that’s right! Put your left foot on the closest pedal, now put all your weight on it. He held Jon under both arms. “OK, I’ve got you. Now put you other foot on the other pedal. Excellent, that’s great. You’ve got a good position. Now just stay like that for a few minutes and get used to the feel of it. I’ll be right back.”

He walked down past the other four, checking their positions. “Excellent, everyone. Now all I want you to do is to turn the pedals half a rotation, you know? Half way round the wheel. Try to stay upright and move slightly along the fence. Stop and get your balance then do it again. Just half a turn at a



time.” He held each of them under the arms for their first turn. “OK, Stacey. Great! ... Chloe ... Well done! Ahmed ... Brilliant! Peter ... Yep, that’s it. Jon ... Jon, I’ve got you, it’s OK!”

“I can’t move, I can’t do it!”

“Yes, you can, just take your time.”

“No, I can’t move my legs.”

“I’m holding on to you, just push your right foot round slowly.”

“No!” Jon was holding onto the fence so hard his knuckles had gone white. He could hear the others laughing along the fence.

“I did it, I’ve done half a turn!” exclaimed Ahmed.

“Yer, me too, w-hoo!”

“I’ve come off!” laughing.

“I think you leant back to far.”

“Dave, can you help me get back on?”

“Yer, just a minute.” He called over his shoulder, then more softly to Jon, “Try not to hold the fence so hard. Just sit there and get comfy. I’ll be back in a minute.” And Dave let go of him. Jon clung onto the fence as if his life depended on it.



Illus. 30: Jon clung onto the fence as if his life depended on it.



Chloe was quickly back on her saddle and the front four continued to inch slowly down the fence, half a turn at a time, offering encouragement to each other as they went. "Now when you feel ready pedal round one full turn," Dave instructed.

"Ahhh!"

"Ohhhh!"

"Yes!"

"Turn round when you get to the top of the slope," Dave called out as he went back to Jon, "and try going the other way. Everyone always finds one way easier than the other at the beginning." He took Jon under the arms again. "Right, now let's have a go; just move that pedal forward slightly." Jon shook his head but Dave caught his eye and smiled. "You'll do just fine" The pedal started to turn, just a few degrees, and then it stopped.

"Great, now try and get it half way round."

The pedal moved again, moving the wheel with it. Jon held onto the fence tight, pulling himself backwards as the wheel went forwards. Off he came, looking despondent. "Well done, you got it to move!" enthused Dave. Crap, thought Jon; I'm crap and you know it. He looked at Dave accusingly.

"OK, let's get back on. Feet flat, saddle up." He turned the pedals to 4 o'clock for Jon. "Now, all your weight on that foot," pointing to the closest pedal. OK, push the pedal round."

Nothing.

"Come on Jon, I know you can do it, everyone can learn to unicycle!" Dave had taught loads of people to unicycle; he firmly believed that anyone could learn. You just needed to keep trying.

The pedal started to turn, just a few degrees, and then it stopped. "Well done, a little bit more." The pedal moved again, moving the wheel with it. Jon held onto the fence tightly, pulling himself backwards as the wheel went forwards. Off he came a second time. It's useless, I'm useless, he thought.

“Dave, we’ve been along the fence and back,” Stacey called over.

“Great, I’ll come over in a minute; turn round one more time.” They all did and moved along again, more confident now, with slightly more speed and a bit less jerky.

“Hey, I just let go of the fence!” shouted Peter to the other three.

“Oh yer?” said Chloe doubtfully in front of him; she couldn’t see him.

“Yer, you try!” She did and managed to pedal one whole revolution before she came off! They took it in turns to watch each other, daring each other to let go each time. Half a revolution, one revolution, one and half!

“Come on Jon, try once more then I must go and help them. Feet flat, saddle up.” He turned the pedals to 4 o’clock for Jon. “Now, all your weight on that foot,” pointing to the closest pedal. OK, now just push the pedal round.” The pedal started to turn, just a few degrees, and then it stopped. “Well done, a little bit more.” The pedal moved again, moving the wheel with it. Jon held onto the fence tightly, pulling himself backwards as the wheel went forwards. Off he came a third time. Useless! he admonished himself.



Illus. 31: “Hey, I just let go of the fence!” shouted Peter to the other three.

Dave helped him back on and held him under each arm again; he could feel Jon's full weight resting on him. "OK, try again. Feet flat, saddle up." He turned the pedals to 4 o'clock for Jon. "Now, all your weight on that foot" pointing to the closest pedal. "Ok, push the pedal round." The pedal started to turn, just a few degrees, but it moved, then it stopped. "Well done, a little bit more." The pedal moved again, moving the wheel with it. Jon held onto the fence tightly, but edged his hands forward slightly, keeping himself upright. The pedal moved a little more, 30 degrees, 60 degrees, 90 degrees. The closest pedal reached 10 o'clock. "Stop!" exclaimed Dave. "That's brilliant, but stop there and get your balance. You did it; excellent! Well done Jon!" (Dave knew the importance of lots of encouragement for a brand-new rider.) Jon smiled, he'd done half a turn.

"Now do it again, just the same." The pedal started to turn ... it kept going this time through half a revolution, a bit shaky but that didn't matter, 30 degrees, 60 degrees, 90 degrees - a quarter turn - keep going, 120 degrees. "Brilliant, well done." Jon smiled again. He had done it – done it twice. Hooray, half a turn of the wheel, amazing, he'd done it, he could do it, half a turn.

"I must go and help them for a bit," Dave said. "You keep practising. Stop after each half turn and get your balance, make sure you are upright, then go another half turn." He let go of Jon and Jon wobbled. "Take it slowly and hold onto the fence!"

Dave jogged over to the others. "OK, let's see you." Each of them showed him in turn, riding one or two revolutions along the fence. "That's a great start, now keep practising and I'll take each of you for a walk. Who wants to go first?"

"Me!" shouted Stacey. Dave took her by the elbows and walked her round in a big circle. It was rather jerky but she managed to stay almost upright and turned the pedals. She screamed excitedly and the others laughed, calling out encouragements to her.





Illus. 33: Each of them showed him in turn, riding one or two revolutions along the fence. "That's a great start..."

Jon didn't hear them; he was oblivious to everything around him. Would he be able to do this without Dave holding on to him? He didn't think so and he clung onto the fence tightly. He sat heavy on the saddle looking at his feet. Half a turn, on my own? No way! Well, I did manage it with Dave. I could just do a quarter turn. If I just push down ... "Oh ohhhh!" The wheel moved slightly and stopped. Jon moved his hands along the fence ever so slightly and sat upright again. A quarter turn – yes! He stared down at his feet, concentrating hard. OK, half a turn this time, half a turn mate, ready? He concentrated hard and the wheel started to turn, 30 degrees, 60 degrees, 90 degrees - another quarter turn - keep going, 120 degrees, wobble, stopped. Don't panic. He felt pleased; that was the furthest he'd gone yet. It was OK. He was moving. He was riding (of a sort).

Right, ready? Yes! He concentrated hard and the wheel started to turn, 30 degrees, 60 degrees, 90 degrees - another quarter turn - keep going, 120 degrees, wobble, keep going, 140, 160 ... almost, 180! He stopped. Yes! Yes! Yes!' The half revolution that Dave had set them – he'd done it. He'd ridden

half a turn, all on his own, with no support – well only the fence. Yes. More confident now, he tried again. He concentrated hard and the wheel started to turn, 30 degrees, 60 degrees, 90 degrees, 120 degrees, 140, 160, 180! He stopped. Yes, twice! He'd done it, twice. He could do it! He did it again and again and again! Stopping each time, getting his balance, getting upright, then going again. He kept his eyes on the pedals, looking down and concentrating hard. Half a turn, always just half a turn, but half a turn every time. Yes! Yes! Yes!

"Watch out!" he suddenly heard someone call and looked up. He was about to ride into the others. They were talking to Dave at the other end of the fence. He had ridden half the length of the playground. Neat! Him, Jon, Tubby, had ridden half the length of the playground, half a turn at time.

"That's really great – I told you you could do it". Dave congratulated him. "Now get off and turn around. You're going to ride back to the class a whole turn at a time." Jon looked him in the eye and smiled.

"OK!"

"Feet flat, saddle up." He turned the pedals to 4 o'clock for Jon. "Now, all your weight on that foot" pointing to the closest pedal. OK, push the pedal round." Jon concentrated hard and the wheel started to turn, 30 degrees, 60 degrees, 90 degrees - another quarter turn - keep going, 120 degrees, 140, 160 ... almost, 180, wobble, keep going, 200, 220, 240, 260, 280, 300, 320, 340, 360! He stopped. Yes! Yes! Yes!

\* \* \*

They had their bags and homework ready. "Well, before you go home I just want to say how very proud I am of you all", Mrs Harvey started. "You all had a go at unicycling this morning; no-one refused to do it. It's a really difficult thing to do but you all had a go. You all went out of your comfort zone and you all managed to stay on. You'll be leaving me soon and going to High School. You'll have so many opportunities there to try new things. I wanted you to see

how it felt, to try something new, to have a go. You must take those opportunities, just as you have today. You have all ...” The bell rang for home-time, interrupting her. “OK, see you tomorrow. Dave is going to bring in another DVD for us to watch!”

Jon went out into the playground with his classmates and walked over to his mum. “Had a good day today J?” she asked him.

“Yer, I rode a unicycle – it was neat!”

\* \* \*

A couple of weeks later Kye came home with a pile of letters for his dad from Year 6. Dave sat down with a beer in the evening and read them.

*Dear Dave,*

*I am writing to tell you how much I really enjoyed unicycling and I would like to tell you what I found out. I went on the internet and found out that the first unicycle was inspired by the penny farthing bike. It was made in 1870. I went on your Canada race website and worked out that your team has 43 years of experience at unicycling. I can't believe that you rode from London to Paris in 3.5 days to qualify for the race. It's amazing you did it.*

*It was Chloe's birthday last week. She asked her mum for a unicycle and got one - how cool. She has shown us some photos of her on it. She was leaning on a wall in them. She says she can't ride it yet, but she practises for a few minutes each day after school. She says she can nearly do it. I enjoyed learning to ride with you but I don't think I want one. A normal bike is much easier!*

*We watched the DVD you left. I liked the forest unicycling best. They must have had a lot of balance. I think unicycling needs a lot of balance. Thanks for coming in. It was really hard to do. I thought it would be but I had fun.*

*Good luck in the race. COME ON ENGLAND!*

*From JON*



## Chapter 16

### “It’s Great, Mint!” – Analysis and Discussion

When a unicyclist manages a particular trick for the first time, or a learner rides across the practice hall unsupported, excited exclamations can be heard from the riders and supporters or observers. These shrieks of delight indicate the intrinsic motivation for the rider and the pleasure and enjoyment felt; the delight of success in this unique sport, at whatever level. “It’s great, mint!” could then describe the satisfaction of the moment, or the sport itself. For me, as a new researcher, a PhD student, I had a strong sense at the start of this study that unicycling was, indeed, “great,... mint”. I knew, of course, that I should not just assume this but that I would have to gather evidence to support my view which is what I have sought to do and present in the narratives. In this chapter I analyse the data to provide evidence for my thesis that unicycling has a positive influence on young riders’ identities.

I analyse the data gathered in accordance with my key themes:

1. motivation,
2. identity,
3. achievement.

As discussed in Chapter 4, my analysis followed a thematic approach against themes that I selected at the outset based on my experiences watching and talking to unicyclists over several years. I analysed the different data sets from the interviews and observations, plus the supplementary data to identify what, if any, significance each story holds in relation to each theme. In this chapter I use transcribed extracts from the interviews of the young riders and from their narratives to illustrate what I regard as significant. I use the word *significant* in the linguistic rather than mathematical sense, to mean that which is referred to in terms of the themes of the study. I then considered the qualitative supplementary data and the quantitative data from the questionnaires to identify whether or not it supports the individual data and therefore the extent to which I can make generalisations within the unicycling community. Once I

have presented the analysis I will seek to answer each key question drawing on my evidence.

## **Analysis: Motivation**

In Chapter 8 I discussed literature on motivation. A key theory with regard to sport is Achievement Theory (Sewell et al., 2005), where individuals are motivated to persist intensely at a task of their choice at which they want to succeed. Goal Setting, a theory defined earlier than Achievement Theory (Beck, 2004), can be seen to have similarities with the latter as individuals set goals they wish to achieve and are then driven to be successful. There are many examples within the narratives where the young unicyclists have been motivated by particular goals. I analyse these in this chapter against Achievement Theory, for the two are closely related. Mastery orientation and intrinsic motivation (Chandler et al. 2004) will also be used as a framework against which to consider the narratives, as both sit within Achievement Theory.

### **Achievement Theory and Mastery Orientation**

Scott clearly articulated that his motivation for learning to unicycle was so that he could play unicycle hockey, and that he was specifically driven by “scoring goals”. He referred to this driver several times in the interview and so it is a key, recurring theme in the story as this extract of dialogue between Scott and the reporter illustrate:

“Why did you want to learn?”

“Score goals!”

“Yer,” laughing.

“Is that the same with football now?”

“I guess.”

“Do you do other stuff on your unicycle? I mean, I don’t know what else people do on them but do you do anything else with it?”

“Na.”

“Just hockey?”

“Yer, but not now, I'd rather play football now.”

“What is it, or was it, about the hockey you liked?”

“Scoring goals ... made me proud.”

“You're a striker?”

“Yer.”

Scott can be seen, then, to be motivated by Goal Setting, clearly linked to Achievement Theory and the intrinsic motivation he feels when scoring goals. He exhibits strong personal belief in his own goal scoring ability, confident from the beginning that he could achieve. This is interesting to me as his body language and limited conversation, even in informal situations when observed talking to those he knows, does not exude confidence.

Max is very clear about his motivation for unicycling, both in the early days when he was learning to ride and now as he specialises in road and cross-country riding – it is quite simply “the challenge”. Max referred to the motivational drive of the challenge constantly throughout all three interviews. He described his attitude towards riding as a child; “I realised it was hard, a challenge, something to master; that was the motivation from the beginning.” About himself as a youth discovering the discipline of cross-country riding he said, “I'm always up for a challenge, try something new!” This then is a major theme in his story, both at the different stages of his riding history but also in the race itself as these two extracts from his narrative illustrate:

Even at 12 Max had a lot of perseverance and so he set to learning how to unicycle. The challenge of it, something so difficult, was what motivated him right from the beginning.

... but then a cyclist friend of his took him along to watch Extreme Endurance when he was 19. He knew Max rode a unicycle and he'd seen unicyclists ride the race the last couple of years – he knew Max would be interested. Interested? It blew his mind! There were these lads riding large 26 and 36 inch wheels, with thick mountain bike tyres, riding through mud and over rocky terrain; here was a whole new side to unicycling and for Max, a whole new challenge, he instantly wanted to do it. Now he had something else to aim for, other targets.

Achievement is crucial to Max in attaining goals or challenges he has set himself. He recognises this and when talking about himself as a young teenager says, "The sense of achievement was a motivator". He exhibits strong personal belief in his own capabilities, both at unicycling and at academic study. These, when considered alongside his behaviour, point towards Roberts' definition of motivation for sport and physical activity discussed in the literature review which recognizes achievement behaviour as being driven by psychological drivers. I give examples of achievement behaviour later in this chapter.

Pete's initial motivation for learning to unicycle was to master a task which he and many others regarded as impossible. Once he started to learn, he very quickly became frustrated by not being able to do it and so for him the desire to master it became even stronger; this drive of Pete's richly illustrates mastery orientation theory:

Pete had gone along with him to learn to juggle but from the very first session the unicycle had just seemed so much more appealing, it seemed to be calling him, it had his name on it. Lou had practised with six balls and Pete had practiced with the unicycle for a few weeks. He could remember the frustration though, he just couldn't get it, couldn't stay on; god it had annoyed him. He had become determined to do it, not to be beaten.

This was true for himself as an individual and, almost simultaneously, as part of a group of unicyclists at school. Like many others who learn to unicycle and who have taken part in this study in one way or another, small goals were deeply significant to him, and to his friends, at the beginning - being able to ride the length of his drive or to turn left for example.

In Sangay's story two of his club members, Flames and Animal, are motivated by the desire to achieve their own goals. This came though in the interview with Sangay, when he talked about his own motivation as well as his club members', and in the focus group I conducted with club members:

Then they'd stop and twist, practising a 360 degree spin on the spot. Animal could only do about 180 degrees but Flames was

almost all the way round. It was a typical unicycling scene; a couple of friends practising together, urging each other to go faster, or higher, or further, depending on what the goal was, usually boys, young lads mostly, just like Flames and Animal, in their teens, riding Street or Trials.

For Sangay, an important motivator was also the desire to do something different, to be unique in some way. At interview he told me:

*The Canadian volunteer with his unicycle looked weird and so attracted everyone's attention. A desire came to me to learn to ride because it looked very special and unique. I was one of the first to learn!*

Unicycling provided an activity by which he could be “special and unique” and so I brought it out in his story:

His interest had been caught by Craig in previous years but what Alex could do on it was just so cool; it looked very special and unique. When you were one of a 1,000 pupils at a boarding school you had to find ways to be an individual, do something different, stand out from the crowd. He had instantly been determined to learn, motivated by the challenge, like so many before him, wherever they learnt, in South Korea, New Zealand, Canada or Holland.

Jon is different from the other main characters because he is completely new to unicycling, and in his story he displays “learned helplessness”, the alternative to Mastery Orientation, when first asked to sit on a unicycle. His view of himself is that he is not good at sports and so he assumes he will not be good at this, looking for excuses and trying to hold back:

“OK, we'd better get started,” Mrs Harvey interrupted. She clapped her hands for quiet. That caught Jon's attention; he hadn't been listening to the questions, he'd been thinking about how awful this was going to be, how humiliating. He wouldn't be able to do it, he'd just look ridiculous trying to balance on one of those stupid one-wheeled bikes. His stomach really hurt now.

“Come on Jon!” Dave called over encouragingly. He had nowhere to hide! “Right, we’ve got 45 minutes so you probably won’t get that far. We’re just gonna ride along holding onto the fence; some of you might manage to let go by the end.” Not me, thought Jon; I won’t even be able to sit on it; looks really awkward. A bike with one wheel; how stupid!

However, what is significant about Jon’s story and the reason that I included it is that Jon’s attitude and levels of motivation changed quickly. Having observed him carefully I suggest this is due to two things. First, he was given, and accepted, a small goal: to turn the wheel half a revolution. This goal was much more achievable than being expected to get on and just ride, which may be what he thought he would be asked to do. Secondly, Dave, who was teaching the class to ride, gave constant encouragement and praise which I observed Jon responding to. Interviewing Jon’s teacher, she confirmed to me that he responds particularly well to praise from significant adults. As he practised and realised that he could achieve the goal then he became far more motivated. This is an example of a young person displaying a desire to succeed, to achieve, as opposed to his early desire to avoid failure, to avoid getting on a unicycle in this case.

All five young riders were clearly motivated to learn to ride by the desire to achieve, to succeed at their goals. Scott, Max, Pete and Sangay were motivated to continue unicycling by new goals, or challenges, they set themselves once they had mastered basic unicycling. The importance to them of the challenge is not personal to them but is a key motivator amongst unicyclists. The data I gathered from the British questionnaires (BUC, 2006) confirms this, with 47% of respondents saying that the challenge was an initial motivator, the highest percentage for any initial motivator, and 67% highlighting it as a continuing motivation for learning new skills. This was particularly so for males, 68% of whom identified it as an on-going motivator compared to 45% of females. Of the male youths (11 to 19 year olds) who responded, 71% were motivated by the initial challenge. The international questionnaires gave very similar results (UNICON XIV, 2008). Respondents were invited to elaborate on their motivation and the two extracts below are typical examples that made reference to goal setting:

*I set small realistic goals.*

*It was a goal that I set for myself; now it's to overcome the difficulty of learning a new trick. And more – the desire to succeed, the pleasure of success.*

The five young riders are typical of the wider community of unicyclists, both youth, and older in their motivation in that they are significantly driven by the anticipation of achievement and the desire to master a skill.

The uniqueness of unicycling, and so the motivation to achieve an unusual goal, was conveyed in Sangay's narrative. In a significant percentage of completed questionnaires, both from UK respondents and those of other nationalities, the desire to be able to unicycle because of its unusualness was a motivator. This was so for 74% of British males and 66% of males of other nationalities and 35% of British females compared to 42% of females of other nationalities.

### **Intrinsic Motivation**

All those at the centre of the five narratives display clear intrinsic motivation. Scott made a repeated point in the interview when he talked of the pride he feels playing unicycle hockey and particularly at scoring goals - "It makes me feel proud of me." This is included in the story several times, as in the example below:

"How does it feel when you're actually playing?"  
"Fun... but tiring as well.... makes me proud,... scoring goals..."

Max is intrinsically motivated and again this is a continuous point of conversation in his interviews, (as can be seen in his transcript in Appendix 5). While he may enjoy riding a faster lap than other unicyclists in the race, he is ultimately motivated by his own goals and his own measures of success. He, like the others, fits Deci and Ryan's description of an internally motivated



person having “the inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one’s capacities, to explore and to learn” (Deci and Ryan, 1985, p.34). An example of this is Max’s description of the adrenalin rush: “Definitely the adrenalin rush is good – quite addictive”.

An example of Pete’s intrinsic motivation is the determination to ride the marathon in a faster time this year than two years ago; it is an internal desire and the anticipated satisfaction which motivates him. Although it was a competitive race there was no external motivation as he realistically knew he would not finish in a significant position. He was only interested in his own time, not his placing, as this extract from his interview illustrates, used then virtually word-for-word in his story:

*I've not thought where I want to come in the race, what position, I'm not bothered about that, but what time I want to have. That's something I can predict; if I train this much and get this fit then I could do it in this time. (Excerpt from Pete's interview)*

He'd not thought about where he wanted to come in the race, what position, he wasn't too bothered about that, but what time he wanted to have. That was something he could predict; if he trained this much and got this fit then he could do it in this time. He had set himself two goals: one, to beat his previous time; two, to beat the world record for marathon running. His brother and dad were really keen runners so there was a bit of family pride at stake, a bit of fun. (Excerpt from Pete's story)

Interestingly, in the short extract above based on his interview, he had minor extrinsic motivation, in that he wanted to beat his brother's marathon running time! Interviewing him, it was obvious that this was a minor motivation compared with the anticipated, intrinsic sense of satisfaction, which was driving him to participate in the marathon, but not so strongly that it had motivated him to do lots of training.

Sangay also demonstrates intrinsic motivation; as a learner he felt that sense of satisfaction at being able to ride unsupported for 10 metres, despite being beaten in this task by Dawa, a peer. Now that he had established the school

unicycle club and was helping pupils to ride his intrinsic motivation was related more to the teaching than his own riding:

He was really proud of the work he had done with some of the riders. Animal and Flames particularly. They were so enthusiastic and, although only a couple of years older than them, he got great pleasure from seeing their satisfaction, how pleased they were with themselves. It satisfied him, knowing he had played even a small part; he sensed their pride. 'They feel proud of themselves,' he thought.

Jon's intrinsic motivation was clearly evident when I observed him trying to complete a small turn of the wheel. While he enjoyed the extrinsic motivators of praise and encouragement from Dave, his face showed real determination and then pleasure as he turned the wheel independently and congratulated himself:

Yes! Yes! Yes! The half revolution that Dave had set them – he'd done it. He'd ridden half a turn, all on his own, with no support – well, only the fence. Yes. More confident now, he tried again. He concentrated hard and the wheel started to turn, 30 degrees, 60 degrees, 90 degrees, 120 degrees, 140, 160, 180! He stopped. Yes, twice! He'd done it, twice. He could do it! He did it again and again and again! Stopping each time, getting his balance, getting upright, then going again. He kept his eyes on the pedals looking down and concentrating hard. Half a turn, always just half a turn, but half a turn every time. Yes! Yes! Yes!

89% of UK questionnaire respondents and 92% of international questionnaire respondents acknowledged the continuing personal satisfaction which unicycling gave them as one of the benefits of the sport; this relates to the examples of intrinsic motivation above (BUC, 2006; UNICON XIV, 2008). An elaborated response in a questionnaire of a young male rider was:

*As a kid I wanted people to see me as someone special. Now it's an inner motivation and satisfaction that drives me...*

Focus group comments support the importance of intrinsic motivation for unicyclists too:

*We can ride on one wheel, but other people can only ride on two wheels ... We feel very proud and show them what we can do!* (Focus Group member A, 2008)

*I feel good when I ride and when I try to do new things ... new tricks.* (Focus Group member B, 2008)

The sense of internal satisfaction that the five young riders gain from unicycling is certainly not unique to them then but is always a key motivator amongst unicyclists. For Scott it is the goal in hockey, for Pete it is a faster marathon ride than his previous time; the specifics may vary but the sense of intrinsic motivation, the satisfaction of achievement is common.

### **Summary of Analysis on Motivation**

The first research question was:

**How are young people motivated to engage and persevere in unicycling?**

Unicyclists want to achieve goals which they have set for themselves; some, such as Jon, break these goals down to make them more achievable, but for all they get progressively harder. The sense of satisfaction, of achievement, felt by riders creates a strong sense of intrinsic motivation. The unusual nature of unicycling, the fact that it is not a mainstream sport, is clearly significant to unicyclists as shown in the evidence above, both as learners and more skilled riders. I find this interesting as, on one hand, I would like to see it promoted in more schools, but, on the other hand, in doing so it may become more mainstream and lose some of its appeal. For those who engage in the sport for a prolonged period of time - a few years perhaps, such as Scott, Max, Pete and Sangay, - the motivation unicycling creates in riders can be long term. Both the level and length of motivation is significant, I suggest - particularly in light of the concerns of many, including Tomlinson (2004) that many young

people are disengaged, lacking in motivation. Here is an activity that clearly creates high levels of on-going motivation for some young people.

### **Analysis: Self-Identity and Self-Esteem**

Identity is a key concern for young people as they move through adolescence and in to early adulthood and leisure activities begin to take on additional significance in relation to self-identity (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). In Chapter 10 I have discussed the link between self-identity and self-esteem and their significance in relation to achievement. In this section I will analyse the data as they relate to individual identity, highlighting evidence relevant to this, my second research theme.

The influence of unicycling on Scott's identity is less obvious than on some of the others. Observing him and talking with him at length I think this is due largely to his age. Adolescence is a time of conflicting loyalties and changes in self-identity as peers become increasingly significant or influential compared to the family (Geldard and Geldard, 2004). This can be seen in Scott's story where he reports on previous enjoyment of unicycling with his family and the closeness it brought them. Indeed, the photograph Scot had chosen to start the interview with was of him riding with his family. The attitudes of his peers to unicycling are increasingly important to him now though. This was made clear by Scott in his interview and I have included it in the narrative as it seemed significant:

*Wendy: Does anyone else in your family ride?*

*Scott: Yer, me dad ... Lewis ... Anna ... not 'er (laughing and cocking his head towards his mum). We used to ride together .... was good!*

*Mum: It was good when you did it together, we all used to go to the club each week. (Excerpt from Scott's interview, p.)*

"Me mum says it's good we ride together, wiv Lewis and Dad ... and Anna."

"Sister?"

"Yer."

“What do your mates think about it?”

“Dunno.”

“Do they know?”

“A bit.”

“Do any of them ride?”

“Na ... used to ... used to come to the club – and me cousin. Were lots of us; it was mint.” (Excerpt from Scott's story)

His perception is that his peers do not, or would not, see it as a “cool” activity so, in his mind at least, it does not carry the credibility that football or playing the guitar does. Therefore he no longer talks about it with his friends, although at primary school, when peers' views were less significant than those of key adults such as family or teachers, he was happy to unicycle in front of them. However, John, who can be described as a mentor to Scott in the sport, is clearly a significant adult for Scott and one whose recognition he values; as a skilled striker, Scott clearly looks up to John and seeks his affirmation. Scott does not, though, see unicycling as a significant part of his identity at this point in time. Contributions from his mother during the interview support this and the reasons given for it above.

In relation to his self-esteem, his unicycling experiences appear to have enhanced it through the pride he has experienced in playing and specifically in scoring goals. Observations showed that he enjoys being complimented on his skill level by spectators, his father or his mentor. In interview he described his skill level as good, suggesting a high level of self-esteem with regard to the sport, but at the same time he does not seem to acknowledge the skill required to play as well as he does, by not wanting his friends to know about his involvement in it. This suggests to me that despite his high skill level unicycling has not had much of an impact on his global self-esteem.

A positive self-identity and self-esteem feature significantly in Max's story, as one might expect given his high level of academic achievement. Learning to ride as a youth he was already confident enough in himself to pursue this unusual hobby and to ride around town on his unicycle, ride it to school and so on. Other, less confident young people may be put off by being different from their peers who become increasingly influential, (Hill and Tisdall, 1997).

This was not the case for Max, who was a confident child, but he did acknowledge in the interviews that unicycling had increased his confidence by helping to overcome temporary setbacks or minor failures, and not to be put off by other people's views about him, as illustrated in the narrative:

Anyway he didn't care what people thought of him or his unicycling, he liked who he was that was an early lesson it had taught him. He had learnt to take the rough with the smooth, to accept the positive comments and ignore the negative ones; it was part of him, it was what he did and it had given him a sense of confidence, the confidence to be who he was, to do his own thing.

This influence on his confidence and self-esteem is referred to in his story in relation to his academic achievements and his self-belief in stepping outside of his family's educational expectations. He recognises that he is one of the country's top riders and enjoys the recognition and respect he gets from fellow unicyclists and cyclists, but while this may have added to his self-esteem as a youth it is not significant to him any more. This is likely due to the fact his global self-esteem is already high and secure, as described by Fox (1992) and Marsh et al. (2006), influenced by his unicycling and academic achievements to date. The impact of unicycling on his self-esteem through his mastery of it as a youth and its significance in his self-identity as a young person would seem to reinforce this.

When telling his own story in the interviews Max frequently talked about unicycling being part of his identity, describing himself as "the guy who rides a unicycle". His positive tone of voice and body language suggests that he enjoys being recognised for this by work colleagues, climbing friends and local kids; although he was reluctant to admit that he liked being "different", rather that being different didn't bother him. An informal interview with his partner, Beth, suggested that in fact he did relish being different and she gave the example of Max wearing a suit and tie in the sixth-form as students were allowed to dress casually! The identity of being different was not explored in the story as it had not come directly from Max himself but it certainly relates to the motivation to unicycle due to its unusualness.

When analysing Pete's interview and narrative it was clear that unicycling has had a positive impact on his self-identity and that this can be related to his motivation as a youth, as riding with friends was important and enjoyable to him, giving him a sense of belonging. At interview Pete talked about the desire to be like another boy at school who could unicycle and so who was regarded as "cool" by his peers. This desire to be like someone else suggests that he was not completely happy with his self-identity at that time as he wanted to take on a characteristic of someone else's identity. During the interview Pete himself reflected on this desire as being rather "sad". The two extracts below, first from the interview and then from the narrative, demonstrate how I have sought to ensure that this significant part of his story is told:

*There was one kid at school who was a couple of years younger than me and who was really cool. He could ride a unicycle – I thought brilliantly, but I know now that he wasn't very good. I suppose I wanted to be him which was a bit sad really. (Excerpt from Pete's interview)*

At last he was like that kid the year below him, who could ride. Pete had watched him messing about on his uni in the playground – God, he was cool! No-one else at school could do that; come to think of it Pete didn't know anyone outside school who could do that, jumping up and down the steps, bunny-hopping along the path. Looking back it was a bit sad wanting to be like someone else; now he liked to forge his own way, no longer so bothered by what others thought. (Excerpt from Pete's story)

This point suggests that he had, to some extent, a low self-esteem around the age of 14 or 15, when he started unicycling. However, as he became more accomplished at it his self-esteem increased, in part due to a growing sense of belonging. Pete also talked about his sense as a teenager that he could not get along with everyone, that he preferred to have a few close friends rather than a lot of friends and that he greatly enjoyed the close friendship he developed with the other unicyclists in his year group. He went on to state that he no longer held the view that he cannot get along with many people and enjoys a much wider social circle, as evidenced by his friendships with riders of different nationalities.



Pete's family is not a theme which really emerges in the narrative, except with passing reference to his brother and dad. I chose not to make significant reference to it as it was not a significant part of the interview dialogue. Pete did talk about his family when asked how they viewed his unicycling but it seemed that his friends played more of a key role than his family members at this time and particularly with regard to his unicycling. The literature review on self-identity confirmed that this is often true for teenagers, particularly in the area of leisure (Geldard and Geldard, 2004; Furlong and Cartmel, 2007).

For Sangay there are two ways in which unicycling has influenced his self-identity; initially as one of the first to be able to ride, to be a "unicyclist", but more recently (and more significantly given how enthusiastically he talked about this role) as the club leader, as a teacher of unicycling. As well as acknowledging his skill this second identity also acknowledged his seniority compared to the pupils and a level of responsibility in common with the other adults at the school. In our interview he told me how the school director talked to him about the unicycle club, asked him what progress the pupils were making and congratulated him on the successes he had in teaching them to ride. This gave him a clear identity and role in the school which he enjoyed. This was evidenced by the respect I observed the club members showed him and the informal leadership role he assumed when with them, as on our visit to the club.

Jon clearly sees himself as someone who is not good at sports. This was obvious in his body language when challenged to sit on a unicycle and was confirmed by his teacher when I interviewed her. Although he achieved reasonably well academically his global self-esteem was low. In Chapter 8 I discussed Fox's (1992) view that physical ability has a significant influence on global self-esteem. I suggest then that this is why Jon's self-esteem was low despite his relative academic success. While I am not suggesting that being able to ride a unicycle for one revolution of the wheel with support had any long term impact on his self-esteem I did observe it lifting his spirits for that afternoon. His positive attitude in the letter he wrote to Dave suggested that

this effect had lasted for a few days at least. The letter I included in the narrative was a copy of the one he wrote himself:

*Dear Dave,*

*I am writing to tell you how much I really enjoyed unicycling and I would like to tell you what I found out. I went on the internet and found out that the first unicycle was inspired by the penny farthing bike ...*

*I think unicycling needs a lot of balance. Thanks for coming in. It was really hard to do. I thought it would be but I had fun.*

*Good luck in the race. COME ON ENGLAND!*

*From JON*

(Excerpt from Jon's letter)

All I seek to illustrate with Jon's experience is that unicycling has the potential to influence self-esteem positively. I suggest that what I had observed was the very start of this process.

The positive influence of unicycling on self-identity and self-esteem is not peculiar to Max, Pete or the others. UK questionnaire data indicates that 60% of respondents (male and female) also felt that it had influenced their self-esteem with 72% of international respondents confirming this (BUC, 2006; UNICON, 2008). They were asked the question "Do you think that unicycling has had a positive effect on you; raised your self-esteem and confidence?" I accept that their responses were not based on measurements but their perceptions.

Given the above analysis I was particularly interested by a comment from a member of the UNICON focus group I held for teachers and mentors of unicycling. A Danish club leader felt strongly that one to one relationships often formed between teachers of unicycling and beginners and this

influenced self-identity positively. He had seen new club members grow in confidence as he or other significant adults took an interest in them and their riding. He suggested that this valuing of them in the eyes of another, a significant adult in this case, made them value themselves; it enhanced their self-identity:

*The one-to-one relationship between a beginner and someone who is teaching them at the club is important as they have a close relationship with another person who is taking an interest in them. To me this is key as it makes them value themselves and believe that they can do it (unicycle). (Focus Group member C, 2008)*

This is interesting to me as relationships are vital for effective learning and so for achievement, in my opinion.

### **Group Identity and Culture**

I have told the narratives with their different disciplines in a way which I hope has illustrated some different subcultures within unicycling. I conclude that there is one overarching unicycle culture, with different disciplines or groups of disciplines having their own subculture within this. In his interview Scott made it clear to me that he was not interested in the wider sport of unicycling to the extent of being part of the global internet unicycling community. His mother confirmed that this attitude was similar to his father's and so he is probably influenced by him in this area. His lack of awareness of the bigger unicycling scene may also be due to his age and very focused drive to play hockey and score goals rather than take part in a number of different disciplines. The interview with Scott did not significantly extend my research on unicycling culture, other than to see that for some riders it is not significant, though it was for Pete when he was a teenager. Some of his mother's comments did make reference to subcultural groups within unicycling, particularly the Trials and Street riders whom she describes as "mashers" (because of their appearance and musical preferences) and whom she likened to skateboarders (a link I have already made in Chapter 12).

The narrative account of Scott's story does give an insight into the subculture of unicycle hockey, in particular the attitude and approach of the players to the sport, themselves and each other, based on formal and informal observations of matches, dialogues with players and analysis of related internet sites. It also seeks to present common attitudes towards unicycling in popular culture held by the general public. These are based on comments made by members of the public and comments recounted to me by players from non-unicycling friends. Through my familiarity with the sport and the unicycling community I regard the attitude of the public towards unicycling as having a significant impact on unicyclists. The general attitude towards it as being a circus activity, a clown's pursuit and so "a bit of a laugh" either makes those who have a strong global self-esteem more defiant about riding, motivated by the uniqueness of it, in part at least, or those with a less secure global self-esteem, such as Scott, lose interest in it when the negative view of outsiders, such as peers, becomes significant to them. As such, cultural perceptions of unicycling have a significant impact on the sport. In my experience, however, and based on conversations with unicyclists and non-riders, once people have watched skilled unicyclists ride, or in Scott's case play unicycle hockey, they quickly come to recognise the high skill level involved and develop a much more positive attitude towards it. This lack of cultural understanding and subsequent change in attitude is shown through the character of Paul, the local sports reporter who dismissed the tournament as a joke until he saw the skill involved. Through Paul, I explored attitudes which affect unicycling culture and made them explicit to the reader. Interestingly it is these negative public attitudes which often stop young riders talking about their unicycling to peers and teachers.

Max admitted that when learning to ride he was unaware of other unicyclists or of the role models that may motivate young riders today and indeed it is only in the last five years that he has become aware of the unicycle community and the culture that goes along with it and its various disciplines. Nor, being content as an individual rider, is he particularly interested in the

labelled clothing or saddles and so on that other riders might value as part of the culture and shared unicycle identity.

At interview Pete talked in detail about various cultural aspects of unicycling which was most helpful and illuminating to me, sometimes in response to direct questions and sometimes whilst talking about his own experiences. His involvement in unicycling, as a teenager and now as a young adult, has given him a good understanding of many aspects of unicycling. At first this was in his immediate circle of friends and peers at school, attending local circus conventions, at which they unicycled. Now, as a young adult with some more disposable income, he can participate in the wider, international community at meets overseas. As young unicyclists, he and his friends were influenced by DVDs of riders like Dan Heaton, who became role models to them. The DVDs showed what was possible on one wheel, how far the boundaries could be pushed and tricks that they could aspire to do in the skate park. Dress and music to accompany the tricks are key elements of the DVDs too though, and they influence the way that young riders dress and behave and, to some extent, what they listen to. Watching trials riders at unicycle events I have observed these same styles of dress and body language and heard the same genre of music pumping out, mostly rap or rock. It is influenced by skateboarding culture and youth culture generally with the dress of “mashers”, baggy hoodies and combat pants, for example. This link to skateboarding culture is reinforced in other case studies, confirming these subcultural identities within Trials, Street and Flatland.

Sangay's story is particularly significant for me in relation to culture as I have used it to illustrate the international community and culture within unicycling, largely created across the internet, and which I would suggest large numbers of young unicyclists are engaged in, using YouTube and dedicated forums. Of course this is a major part of youth subculture today anyway (Stahl, 2003). Through Sangay's two club members, Flames and Animal, I have demonstrated some of the universalities of the subculture, or in their case the subculture of Trials and Street, as I have observed these young riders' dress,

music, motivational drivers, social relationships, use of the internet and so on, as illustrated in this extract from Sangay's narrative:

They circled round and round, listing over as they rode to catch additional speed; an old transistor radio on the ground, pumping out some local station, rock music at full volume. Then they'd stop and twist, practising a 360 degree spin on the spot. Animal could only do about 180 degrees but Flames was almost all the way round. It was a typical unicycling scene: a couple of friends practising together, urging each other to go faster, or higher, or further, depending on what the goal was, usually boys, young lads mostly, just like Flames and Animal, in their teens, riding Street or Trials. The baggy trousers hanging low were a trademark style for male, adolescent unicyclists, borrowed from the skateboarding and BMX cultures they sometimes rode with. Usually a hoodie was worn on top, typical youth subculture today, anti-establishment almost given the menacing, negative stereotypes of hooded youth in the media. Without a hoodie on, shirts had to be cool, like Flames' and Animal's. You were making a statement after all, even if you didn't realise it. Unicycling was cool and you had to look cool, look the part – it was the same wherever you were.

For an isolated club, like Sangay's, the internet is particularly important as it provides easy access to the rest of the community. Sangay talked extensively about this, both when I interviewed him and through extended email dialogue. The dedicated forums, while being part of the culture, also help to build and reinforce the culture, particularly the visual culture: the internet galleries where unicyclists post their photos are very popular, especially with young people, such as Animal and Flames. The content here is specific to unicycle but the use and importance of the media is not, it is common to other subcultures at the start of the twenty first century.

Jon knew nothing about unicycling before his lesson but I used his narrative as an opportunity to illustrate some different aspects of the culture, such as the DVDs made by popular role models. Interestingly the class teacher thought that the children had been so engaged by the unicycling lesson that she followed it up with several literacy tasks that week which resulted in the letters to Dave. In researching for these letters Jon and his peers found out various facts about the sport, which illustrated the culture but which they would not have recognised for that.

With regard to unicycling encouraging group identity, Scott did talk to me about attending the club a year or so ago with friends, his cousin and family:

“What do your mates think about it?”

“Dunno.”

“Do they know?”

“A bit.”

“Do any of them ride?”

“Na ... used to ... used to come to the club – and me cousin. Were lots of us; it was mint.”

He clearly enjoyed this and the closeness it brought, but seemed equally happy, relieved almost, to have moved on from this. I think this relates to his engagement in football now which he sees as a streetwise sport he can play with other friends.

Analysing Max's interview, he was a confident child, something of an individual, even early on. He did not feel the need to be part of a particular group, as might younger riders still exploring their own identity. This short extract from his narrative illustrates where he already had friendship groups:

... and so he'd ridden it regularly, daily almost. He rode on it with his friends; they made little jumps in the street for their BMX bikes and Max did them on his Pashley.

This has been true throughout his unicycling and he has not, therefore, become significantly involved in the international forum on the internet or joined the UK Union of Unicyclists, preferring instead to ride as an individual, as is made clear in the story which sets him as a solo rider rather than a team member. Having said that, he did talk at interview about the enjoyment of being part of the group of unicyclists at the race and the opportunity to socialise with friends in the sport. He was happy to be part of the larger group and liked that identity but he would rather ride solo as it gave him additional challenges.



A significant motivator for Pete which comes through in the story and which I can track back through his interview is the social impact unicycling has had on him. A key experience within his story is that of the growing friendship between the Guys, the friends who learnt to unicycle together and then who had, in unicycling, something which bonded them together, a commonality, but which at the same time made them different from the crowd, the rest of their year. This is illustrated in two different extracts below, the first from the interview, the second from the narrative, on the same theme of group identity but different memories:

*And at school at the same time we started doing stuff, riding round the gym, trying to turn left which is so much harder than turning right ... We'd go out in the playground too and use the steps up to the gym. We had a ramp that we put up the steps – it was great fun; we were learning tricks together. (Excerpt from Pete's interview)*

The guys had changed all that, given him a defined group, good friends. They shared a common interest, a group identity; gave him an identity, no longer drifting, now forged with others. They stuck together, had to stick together; they were different from the rest and that wasn't always a good thing. Being different at school wasn't always a good thing; you felt like a party in the wilderness, you had to keep together or you'd die. (Excerpt from Pete's story)

This sense of identity, both group and individual, was clearly important to Pete as he was growing up and finding his way through school, with all the social pressures of adolescence. At his current point in life Pete clearly enjoys the social opportunities to make new friends with other unicyclists and particularly enjoys meeting up with those from other countries, which an event like UNICON facilitates.

Pete went on to talk about changes to his self-esteem and group-identity brought about by unicycling as this transcribed extract from his interview shows:

*“You referred in your email to low self-esteem, Pete. Has unicycling impacted on this at all?”*

*“Yes, yes, absolutely (pause) because we forged a group, the groups of us who did it. I was feeling awash in a year of people – boys – er ... (pause). This gave me a defined group of friends, I didn't care what anyone else thought then.”*

Sangay relished the group identity he felt being part of the international unicycling community. This was evident in his email dialogue with me and in the pride he took of his club's photo in the international magazine. A copy of the photo and accompanying article had been framed and hung on the wall of the school. He showed it to us very proudly. Members of his club who participated in the focus group talked about their more immediate friendships and group identity within the club as illustrated in these examples:

*It was difficult at first (to unicycle), but lots of our friends showed us how and gave us a good experience. (Focus Group member A, 2008)*

*It was difficult but my friend encouraged me in the club. Now we can ride we can encourage others. It is a unique thing – we are unique. (Focus Group member E, 2008)*

Jon was, of course, in a different situation to the other young riders in that he was riding with his classmates. The lesson came at the end of primary school and they had known each other a long time and there were strong friendships. What the unicycle lesson did was give them something special to share together as they prepared to disperse to different secondary schools. This was confirmed by Jon's teacher.

In the two questionnaires I asked, “Do you think that unicycling has helped you to make new friends and feel included?” and “Do you think that unicycling has strengthened friendships or community bonds? 85% of the UK respondents answered “yes” to the first question, with 32% answering “very much” (BUC, 2006). To the second question 59% answered “yes” and 29% answered “very much”. 79% of young males (11 to 19 year olds) thought it had helped them to make friends and 64% that it had strengthened friendships. The international questionnaire received a very similar response to the UK one for these two questions (UNICON XIV, 2008). As such the

questionnaire data does not add anything new to the interview data or supplementary qualitative materials but they are supportive of each other.

## **Summary of Analysis on Identity**

The second research question was:

**How does unicycling influence the development of identity in young riders?**

### **1. Personal Identity**

I have presented evidence above of young riders for whom unicycling is an important component of their identity. The significance of it for them varies from individual to individual. Max was happy to be associated with this sport throughout his youth, for example, but Scott no longer wants to be. What they have in common is that at some point in their youth it has had significance for them and been part of their self-identity. I have referred to Denscombe's (2001) five concepts; these are looking "grown-up", "cool", "hard", "in control" of themselves and the situation and "taking calculated risks". The narratives have illustrated that unicycling can provide opportunities for each of these and, as such is able to positively influence self-identity to varying degree. Of course adolescence is a time of change and development for young people (Hill and Tisdall, 1997). They can change interests, dress style and friendship groups as they explore who they are. Some will come to unicycling and stay with it throughout adolescence, as Max, Pete and Sangay did. For others, like Scott, it will be significant for a while and then they will move on to something else. This does not mean that it is not of importance to them and their identity while they are engaged in it. Indeed, as Scott's narrative suggested, some will and do return to it.

With regard to self-esteem, I have given examples of how unicycling influences or enhances this. The significance of an increase in self-esteem from unicycling is that it can improve global self-esteem which can improve

other areas of learning. Of course, self-esteem is strongly linked to intrinsic motivation discussed earlier in this chapter. I suggest it is the recognised difficulty of unicycling, the fact that it looks hard to master, which makes it increase self-esteem. Any progress on a unicycle is an achievement, partly because of the physical and technical difficulty involved, but also because so few people can ride one, compared to riding bicycles for example. Jon illustrates how a very small success makes him feel good about himself. Indeed, in the time I have been involved with the sport I have never observed anyone feel negatively about themselves as a result of unicycling, for example if they are unable to do a certain trick. I have seen people get very frustrated and throw their unicycles down on the ground, cursing even as they miss an easy goal in hockey or only manage 180 degrees of a 360 degree spin. But these are temporary setbacks, as confirmed by a young focus group member in Manchester:

*It's hard when you're learning a new trick. I get cross, really cross sometimes, when I can't do it. Took me ages to bunny hop down steps. I just kept falling off and thinking "Shit, I'm never gonna do this!" but I kept at it and now I can do seven steps! Ace! (Focus Group member D, 2007)*

From the data I have gathered I conclude that unicycling does have a positive influence on young riders' self-identity in that they see it is a significant element of who they are, for some time at any rate. Similarly it has a positive effect on their self-esteem and makes them feel good about themselves and what they can do, on a unicycle at least. There is some evidence that it also enhances their self-esteem and confidence in other areas and I will discuss this further in this chapter under the subheading Achievement.

## **2. Social Identity**

Reflecting on my research project it is clear that my interest in the subculture of unicycling and its disciplines was ignited by the fact that the sport is so little known. I felt it necessary to document the culture to some extent, in order to create a context for my data to sit within. Through the background contexts of the narratives, and the specific examples above, I have sought to show that unicycle does have an identifiable culture although little of it is specific to

unicycling. Instead much of it is similar to other sports, such as skateboarding or cycling, or even general popular culture or youth culture. One element which I would suggest is particularly significant is the laid back attitude to life, the desire to “forge your own way” as Pete put it. I think this is brought about by the uniqueness of unicycling I discussed earlier. The culture and subcultures do facilitate, indeed encourage, a group identity amongst unicyclists.

All of the narratives, with the exception of Jon's, have shown clear evidence that unicycling provides a group identity for those who want it. The strength of this identity seems to vary depending on the needs of the individual rider. Max, for example, just wanted to socialise with other unicyclists at the race. Pete on the other hand had relied heavily for a while at school on the Guys and the sense of belonging to their group which was based around unicycling. I conclude then that unicycling and its subcultures does allow for group identities to be formed, particularly in young people, largely because those in the group of unicyclists are so visibly different from others because they are riding a one wheeled bike.

### **Analysis: Achievement**

In the first section of analysis I examined data in relation to motivation and particularly the achievement theory. There was clear evidence that the young riders, and members of the wider unicycling community are motivated by a desire to achieve. Achievement in some aspect of unicycling, a particular discipline or skill, is evident in all of the narratives and so I am not going to discuss this further. I have already presented strong evidence that unicycling is a sport which allows all individuals to achieve as it is about setting your own goals, however small, and so measuring your success however you choose to. What I am interested in here is whether or not achievement in unicycling has any relationship to achievement in any other areas of life and, for young riders particularly, in school.

Taking Max as an example, he identified one of his current motivators for unicycling as being “a fitness thing”; his regular riding enables him to keep fit and healthy, to achieve fitness. This provides daily motivation while the goals of riding faster and for longer provide long term motivation. In the story there is frequent reference to being fit and building up stamina, both of which are important goals for Max for his unicycling but also his rock climbing to which he is very committed and also does on a weekly basis. Collins and Kay (2003) recognise the potential of sport for ensuring health. As a teenager Max unicycled to his regular karate training as an added means to achieve the necessary level of fitness. He provides one example, then, of how unicycling can lead to achievement elsewhere. I recognise that it is very difficult to identify any concrete influence unicycling has on achievement in other fields. Before I began to analyse Max’s data I acknowledged that while unicycling may have influenced his achievements it was not the sole factor and I made this clear in his narrative:

He’d set himself a difficult task and he’d mastered it through perseverance and determination. That had been another early lesson: anything was achievable if he put his mind to it and so he had kept going at school, the first in his family to do A levels. His teachers encouraged him to go to university; why not? He would do what he could and so had persevered again, got a good degree and went straight on to a PhD. He wasn’t saying it was all due to his unicycling but he was convinced it had helped him along the way, made him resilient, taught him to focus on small targets to achieve big goals - his PhD was almost complete.

With regard to achievement in other spheres I was interested in this expanded response written on one of UK questionnaires by a young man in his 20s:

*Unicycling has had a major effect on most areas of my life, both inside and outside me.*

Of course, I should be careful not to over interpret statements such as this. I read it as “Unicycling has enabled me to achieve success in some areas of my life” and so I see it as evidence that unicycling influences achievement in different fields.

With regard to achievement in school, none of the narratives has actual examples of unicycling influencing this because it did not come through directly in any of the five sets of interviews. What the young riders did talk about, which is in the narratives, was an increased focus or concentration, the confidence to try a difficult task or a strong perseverance which they attributed to varying degrees to unicycling. Scott told Paul of how he thought it helped him:

“But it must be good for you; you said you had to be focussed.”

“A bit.”

“What else do you think you’ve got from it?”

“Dunno ... stay ‘ealthy ...”

“It’s a challenge, I guess.”

“Yer! Me mum says it ‘elps me concentrate. She says it ‘elped me balance too.”

“Didn’t you want to give up when you couldn’t ride immediately?”

“A bit ... me mum says it taught me to try ‘ard things ... I don’t mind ‘ard things now. I’ll ‘ave a go.”

Scott’s motivation has commonality with Max, Pete and Sangay’s club members, Flames and Animal, in triggering Achievement Behaviour. According to Roberts (2001) true motivational theories in physical activity must address all three aspects of achievement. These are energisation, direction and regulation. I suggest that the narratives have illustrated that all three are present in unicycling or in unicyclists. The constructs which underpin these are personal goals, emotional arousal and personal agency beliefs, the belief in one’s capabilities. The achievement behaviour they affect are behaviours such as trying harder, concentrating more, persisting longer, paying greater attention, performing better and choosing to practise longer. Scott referred to two of Roberts’ behaviours; specifically to concentrate more and to practise longer. Scott, for example, talked several times about being “focused” and this could be seen as “paying greater attention” to the activity. Robert’s other behaviours can be seen in Max and Pete’s narratives.



## Summary of Analysis on Achievement

The third research question was:

### **Do achievements in unicycling transfer to other contexts of learning?**

Data from the narratives clearly evidences achievement in unicycling and achievement behaviour which may impact on other areas. This is supported by data from both sets of questionnaires (BUC, 2006; UNICON XIV, 2008). 32% of UK respondents and 43% of international respondents felt that unicycling had *increased their self-control*. 34% of UK respondents and 47% of international respondents thought that it had *developed their concentration*; both are types of achievement behaviour. Whilst these percentages are not large, they are significant, I suggest, as illustrated by one male questionnaire respondent in his early 20s who made this interesting comment:

*“When I started unicycling I noticed my grades go up at school – they got better. Looking back now I realise it taught me to concentrate, try harder I mean; it made me feel good too.”*

His comment links together achievement, achievement behaviour and self-esteem, a relationship I have sought to illustrate.

In drawing these conclusions, I repeat that I am not calling for unicycling to be part of the formal curriculum. Rather what I am suggesting is that schools should review the opportunities that pupils are given in the full curriculum to ensure that all individuals have a chance to develop high levels of motivation and then achieve their full potential in a school context, albeit in a non-academic subject or activity, by valuing activities young people choose as part of their daily lives. If teachers plan learning opportunities creatively and sensitively they may be able to harness this motivation and its related achievement behaviour. Jon's teacher, talked about a series of IT and literacy lessons following on from an (extra-curricular) unicycling lesson. She used the motivation and enthusiasm from unicycling to provide a subject for pupils to

research on the internet and asked them to write letters to the unicycle instructor about what they had found out. This stimulus created some of the best quality literacy work that pupils had done for a long time, she recalled. Conversely, if educationalists are not seen by pupils to value youth-selected activities in educational settings then, as well as not harnessing related motivation, they are at risk of disengaging pupils, as the interview with a father on page 1 of the Preface demonstrates. But what may be even more significant than disengagement is for schools to ignore pupils' experience, thereby devaluing something of the young person's life, indeed of their identity.

Data I have so far indicate three significant things. First, that unicycling motivates individuals to persevere at difficult tasks and can develop concentration and focus, leading to enhanced levels of achievement motivation. Secondly, unicycling, through intrinsic motivation, creates a sense of intense satisfaction as new skills are mastered and challenges met, and this has a positive impact on self-esteem and self-identity. Thirdly, the intense satisfaction experienced by the rider can promote Roberts' achievement behaviour. All these aspects of behaviour could be harnessed in school.

Of course, not everybody wants to learn to unicycle or will persevere until they master it, but many pupils do have interests which motivate them, activities which are exciting, significant and important to particular individuals. What teachers and practitioners working with young people need to do is to know those individuals well and know what it is that motivates them so that they can harness that motivation. This idea is not new, but in the current climate of increasing government directives, bureaucratic requirements and an emphasis on assessment, it can easily be forgotten.

### **Reflections on Research Methods and Data**

The interviews with the young riders, and the complementary observations have provided rich data which has enabled me to construct detailed narratives that illuminate the 3 research questions. The qualitative data from the wider

sources have helped me to create the contexts in which the narratives are framed and have been useful in illustrating the broader culture of unicycling. The quantitative data from the questionnaires I have used only to a minor extent. At the start of this project it seemed that this data would be significant for analysing the larger community. However as the project developed and the narratives emerged the individuals became the primary focus for me rather than the larger community. However there is much interesting data here for future analysis.

My immersion and participation in the community has been an advantage in that it has allowed me to move freely amongst participants and to gather detailed and sometimes sensitive data that would not have been easily accessible to an outsider. The potential disadvantage has always been the scope for subjectivity on my part. I have sought to minimise this by standing back to look at the data and by making my relationships with those in the study explicit, constantly adopting researcher reflexivity. Comparing the young unicyclists' individual sets of data to that from other sources in the community, such as the focus groups, has facilitated some triangulation to further minimise my own subjectivity. On reflection, being a participant in this lifestyle sport has been extremely beneficial to my study.

## Chapter 17



### Super Success – Mr. McTavish's Story and Conclusion

#### Introduction

The overarching aim of my research project was to illustrate a little known sport, unicycling, as an activity which influences identity in young riders. I did not set out with a hypothesis to prove or disprove, nor did I wish to measure scientifically the rise in self-esteem or count the number of grade points increased in school as a result of someone unicycling. As unicycling has not previously received academic attention there is no body of literature on it. This thesis makes a modest start to the process of critical appraisal of the phenomena. I have done this through the most appropriate form possible, in my opinion, by telling the stories of five young riders and so presenting their lived experiences. I have analysed these, and supplementary data gathered from the wider unicycling community, against three key themes of interest to the education community: motivation, identity and achievement. I hope, though, that the narratives speak for themselves, that the key themes are clearly evident in them, in the voices of the young riders.

Given that my thesis is structured around stories and is not seeking a conclusive answer to a scientific hypothesis, it seemed appropriate to conclude with a story and so what follows is a short narrative by way of a conclusion. The points that I would wish to make in any conclusion are well articulated by the two characters in the story who are each educationalists too.

## Sources and Contexts

Rather frustratingly, the school on which I base this short story only became known to me as I reached the end of my research. However, its practice is significant for my interests and indeed, on completing this current project I next hope to undertake a case study of the school. I have had an email dialogue with the headteacher and he sent me his HMI report which gives detailed information about the school and its achievements. I have drawn significantly on both these sources for this story.

## Voice and Authenticity

This short narrative is the story of the headteacher of a secondary school in Scotland who recognised the potential of unicycling for learning when he watched his brother learn to ride. The school now teaches unicycling as part of its curriculum. His voice comes through the story in his enthusiasm for unicycling and his commitment to his pupils. Mr. McTavish has read the story and confirmed that it is accurate and anonymised and supports its inclusion here.

The inspection report which is included in part is the actual report written on the school at its last HMI inspection in 2008 (HMI, 2008). The names of the school and those involved have been changed to provide anonymity. However I wanted to use the actual report as the inspectors articulate well the conclusions I would wish to draw from my study.



## Super Success – Mr. McTavish's Story

It was a typical Scottish spring day; the air was still cold and it was not exactly sunny but the grey of the winter skies had gone. Mr. McTavish, the headteacher, watched the inspector's car drive in to the car park. He went out to greet her and as she stepped out of her car two Year 4 boys sped past on unicycles, racing each other.

"What was that?" the inspector asked, confused for a minute.

"Oh, just Ian and Angus getting in some practice for an upper school race next week," McTavish replied. "Welcome to Blair Castle High School. It's good to have you with us, Ms Donaldson. Let's start with a coffee then I'll show you round the school."

"That'd be great, I've not been here before and please call me Mary."

The two of them walked in to the main building, McTavish leading the way. Mary's attention was grabbed by a display in the foyer: "Our One Wheel Wonders", the title proclaimed. There were a lot of photos on the wall of pupils, she assumed they were pupils, riding unicycles.

"That's not something you see everyday!" she said.

"No! We have quite a few pupils who can unicycle," McTavish replied nonchalantly. Mary paused and looked at some of the photos closely. There was a boy riding along an upturned PE bench; another hopping down the entrance steps she had just walked up. Two girls were holding hands and riding in opposite directions in a tight circle. A group of about six boys and girls were grouped together under a basketball net, one of them with a ball in his hands aiming at the basket. A girl riding a tall unicycle, at least her own height; how did she get on that? Her favourite was of a boy who looked about 14, caught in mid-air, sitting on the saddle of a unicycle, his torso twisted as it spun to keep up with the unicycle on what appeared to be a full spin. "Wow, I'd like to know more about that!" she said enthusiastically as they walked up the corridor to his office. They sat down and coffee arrived.



Illus. 33: A girl riding a tall unicycle, at least her own height; how did she get on that?

“So tell me about those photos,” she said. “They were fascinating.” She always tried to relax the Head in the preliminary visit. It was important to establish a good relationship and get a dialogue going. It made it so much easier when she came back with her team for the actual inspection.

“Well, we have a unicycle club running here,” McTavish started. “It’s been going for a couple of years now. There are quite a few members.”

“Oh, how many?”

“About 60 at the last count.”

“Sixty! Wow, I expected you to say about 16. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone unicycling before, I mean apart from in a circus.”

“Oh, watch what you say. Unicyclists get very upset if you associate them with clowns,” he interrupted.

“Oh, sorry. Why are there so many children who ride here?”



"Well, I introduced unicycle lessons two years ago. Just with a few of the pupils to start with, those who wanted to from Year 5, and it's just grown from there. The children have really got into it. We have about 100 pupils who can ride competently, some of them are brilliant, amazing. You saw the photos for yourself!"

"Yes!" Mary agreed.

"I introduced it to provide an opportunity for success to those who don't do well academically. You know, of course, that while we have generally very good results some of our youngsters don't do so well, can't hit the national average. One or two of them don't even come close. Well, I was looking for something different, something that no-one in the school, none of the pupils, had any experience of so that they all started on a level playing field."

"But, how did you settle on unicycling? You have to admit it is very unusual."

"Exactly, that's the great thing about it. It takes a lot of perseverance and motivation to learn but once you can do it you have this really great skill that no-one else has. It makes you feel really special. That first group of pupils that learnt, they were so delighted with themselves. They couldn't stop riding around the playground, showing off to the others. That just made other children want to learn so I had to expand the project. Now anyone who wants to can learn."

"The fact that so many of them can ride now, doesn't that diminish the appeal for some of them?"

"No, not really. I was afraid of that but once you do basic unicycling, riding in a straight line, there are so many different things you can do. The boys that passed you as you got out of your car ..."

"Oh, yes!"

"They're practising for races next week. Some of the children like to do speed riding. They'll ride round the running track, different distances, 50 metre sprint is the first one I think. You have to get a really fast start for that! A group of half a dozen sixth formers are doing a 10 mile road ride around the area. Two of my PE staff will be out with them on their bikes, one at the front and one at the rear. Other children like to do Trials tricks. They build obstacles in the playground after school and ride over or along them. It's quite popular for

some of them to go off-road riding in the woods behind us.” He cocked his head to the back of the school. “Some lunchtimes there’s hockey or basketball matches in the sports hall. Anyone who wants to ride just turns up. Unfortunately there are no other teams round here so we don’t know how good we are! Apparently there is quite a big hockey league in England so the older ones keep hassling me to take them down to play in a match. They’d love that, I know.”

“Well, I’m amazed by this. I’ve never heard of anything like it. What do the pupils think of themselves?”

“It really raises their self-esteem. They just feel so good about learning to ride, and then of course they want to keep going to learn a trick or something. Their self-esteem is important in everything they do so we are always looking for ways to enhance it. The increase in their global self-esteem from unicycling is generalisable and has wider impact.”

“I can see how it would,” Mary replied, nodding.

“We have some great DVDs from some of the best riders in the world. They are really motivating for the pupils and we often play them over lunchtime in the sixth form common room, but any of the club members can go in and watch. That’s another good thing that’s come out of it. It helps pupils get to know others. They have started socialising across the year groups much more; they have something in common now regardless of their year and it’s not the case that the older children are always the best. Some of the younger ones have taught older pupils to ride or do a particular trick. The relationships it has developed have been good to see. It really gets them talking too as they have to explain to others what to do, or give each other advice. Relationships are so important for effective learning, whatever the subject, so it’s teaching them transferable skills.” He was really enthusing now.

“Yes, I can see that too,” she encouraged him. It was fascinating listening to him talk. He was clearly committed to the project. She felt good about the upcoming inspection already. When you had an enthusiastic and motivated Head who welcomed you into his school it was so much easier.



Illus. 34: "We have some great DVDs from some of the best riders in the world. They are really motivating for the pupils..."

"It's an extreme form of kinaesthetic learning," McTavish continued. "I think it's so important to provide for a wide range of learning styles, otherwise you are denying some pupils the chance to achieve right from the start. Some of them have become really engaged and spend all their time out of the classroom riding. It gives them a great focus and they suddenly find motivation. I've been astounded by the levels of perseverance some of them show; they have become resilient learners and the staff see that transferred into other areas. I'd even say it gives one or two of them a meaning in life, a constant challenge. Their faces just light up the moment they get on the saddle."

"Well, we'd really like to know more about this when we come back."

"Of course while the main effect is motivational and kinaesthetic learning," he continued, in full stride now, "there is also the question of where it impacts on the curriculum. There have been some interesting discussions in science about gravity and the physics of balance, gears, etc. I also see some of the pupils' language developing through the motivation they get from this sport. This is an area that needs to be further explored, but of course not all children in a class are equally engaged so it can be difficult for the teacher to use this too much. Some teachers, of course, don't always see the opportunities that exist with it. I can't see Mrs. Morrison, who will be retiring at Christmas, seeing this as an opportunity in the Maths..."

"Well, we'd really like to know more about this when we come back." Mary repeated.

"The children always love to show people – they just adore the responses they get! Have you finished your coffee?"

"Yes."

"Then let me show you round."

They left his office and walked along the corridor towards the hall. Mary could hear music coming from nearby; it sounded like country dancing – good extra-curricular activity, she thought. That was what she was more used to seeing. They reached the hall and paused. There was, indeed, country dancing but the pupils were doing it on their unicycles! She had to smile to herself. That really was amazing. They stood and watched for a moment. The group had formed two lines opposite each other and were holding hands to make an arch, they were idling on the spot trying to stay upright. The couple at the bottom of the line took hands and rode up under the arch having to bend low. One or two of the pupils forming arches fell off their unicycles but the couple underneath kept going. There was much laughter and enjoyment. They were having a really good time! The song ended and they all applauded each other.

One of the girls, who looked about 15, came over to them.

"Will you do the next dance with me Mr. McTavish, Sir, please?" He looked at Mary.

"Do you mind?"

"No, of course not! I didn't realise you rode."

"Yes!" he laughed "I was the first in school to learn! Well if I was going to expect them to try it, to put in all that time and effort, then I had to show them it was possible!" He picked up a spare unicycle that was leaning against the wall, raised the saddle quickly and jumped on.

\* \* \*

About 4 weeks later McTavish's secretary handed him an envelope with the HM Inspectorate logo on it and a West Lothian postmark. This was the

inspection report he'd been waiting for. He was excited to read it, knowing that the inspection had gone well; he had such faith in his staff and the pupils. He scanned it quickly, picking out key findings:

Blair Castle High School was a very successful school. Under the leadership of the committed and inspirational headteacher, the school had established an outstandingly positive climate in which all pupils were expected to achieve very highly ...

Overall the school was very successful in raising pupils' achievement ... Nearly all pupils were confident and successful learners. They participated actively in the extensive range of out of class opportunities and contributed effectively to the school and the wider community ...

The quality of learners' experiences was consistently very high. Staff had successfully created a very positive and inclusive environment for learning. Pupils of all levels of attainment and at all stages worked enthusiastically and cooperatively with their teachers. They related well to one another and responded positively when given the opportunity to work in pairs or in small groups ...

## **Appendix 4 Good Practice**

In the course of the inspection, the following aspects of innovative and effective practice were evaluated as being worthy of wider dissemination.

### **4.1 The Unicycling Project at Blair Castle High School**

Within a climate of high expectations of achievement for all, the headteacher had recognised that not all pupils could attain a high degree of academic success, and that many faced significant barriers to learning. In this context, he introduced the unicycling challenge to the school. This activity differed from anything else ever tried by people in the school, and so no one had any prior learning or experience to support them. As part of his commitment to set himself challenges and lead by example, the headteacher undertook to learn to unicycle himself.

The project was very successful. Around a hundred pupils became competent unicyclists, and many developed a high degree of skill. Included in this group were pupils who had experienced only a limited degree of success in other school activities. Success in

unicycling significantly developed their self-esteem. The headteacher himself was successful.

The headteacher was able to use the key message of the project both with the unicyclists and with other learners across the school. He could demonstrate that success may often seem unlikely or impossible, but that perseverance is required. As one pupil commented: "When you fall off, you get back on and try again. That's how you learn." This work supported the very high expectations for achievement in the school ...

He smiled to himself. It wasn't just the pupils who got so much from it. It gave him a real buzz, this whole unicycle thing...



## Achieving the Goals - The End of the Story

### ... to Finish the Ride

“Well done,” she exclaimed; “I’m so proud of you ... I guess I never doubted you’d do it. I know it’s taken a huge amount of work, a huge amount of perseverance, but you’re so bloody obstinate, so strong willed. You wouldn’t have let yourself fail. I am so proud of you.”

“I loved the challenge!” he replied, so pleased with himself.

“Well, I think you’re fantastic!!”

“It’s such a great sense of achievement.”

“I’m not surprised, all that hard work!”

“It feels pretty cool to have done it!”

“Well, I still think you’re mad, but well done!” He had to admit she was right; it had taken a long time, so much planning and preparation, but he knew right at the beginning that it’d be worth it and it had been. What a sense of achievement, of accomplishment he felt; not many people could say they’d done that.

It had been a long, lonely task though, that had required a huge amount of perseverance, of keeping going when he felt like giving up; when he thought he wasn’t getting anywhere, not making any progress. He had had to be diligent, resolute; he had used sheer determination to stick it at, begin another day, pick himself up and go at it again. He had had to be self-reliant; he had been on his own for much of it and so he had been the only one who could make it happen. Yes, others had supported him, offered advice and guidance, suggested strategies that’d worked for them, but at the end of the day it had been up to him and him alone. He had had to find his own path to the goal; his own style, his own identity, his own way of doing it. He had known it was a big undertaking; if he was honest he hadn’t know quite what a big undertaking it was – unicycling across the Himalayas - but he had been determined to do it and he had done it; after all she always said he was bloody minded.

“You are mad; you’re crazy, idiotic, insane! It’s fantastic – well done! She threw her arms around him and congratulated him with a kiss. “I’m so proud of you!” she laughed, squeezing him tight!



### ... to Finish the PhD

“Well done,” he exclaimed; “I’m so proud of you ... I guess I never doubted you’d do it. I know it’s taken a huge amount of work, a huge amount of perseverance, but you’re so bloody obstinate, so strong willed. You wouldn’t have let yourself fail. I am so proud of you.”

“I loved the challenge!” she replied, so pleased with herself.

“Well, I think you’re fantastic!!”

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"You are mad; you're crazy, idiotic, insane! It's fantastic – well done! He threw his arms around her and congratulated her with a kiss. "I'm so proud of you!" he laughed, squeezing her tight!



This thesis explored the motivation for mastering the difficult and lonely task of learning to ride a unicycle; in doing so it has also explored the difficult and lonely journey undertaken on a PhD study. It examined the processes involved in becoming a rider and becoming a researcher; both are driven by passion and commitment to an end goal and as such they have something in common, yet at the same time each is unique to the individual as she travels on her story. This thesis presented some of those stories, stories which, like this research, have not come to an end, but are on-going, seeking out the next challenge, the next goal.



Illus. 35: This thesis presented some of those stories, stories which, like this research, have not come to an end, but are on-going, seeking out the next challenge, the next goal.

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## **Appendix One**

### **Interview Questions and Prompts**

## Interview Questions and Prompts

### **INTERVIEW 1: CURRENT UNICYCLING**

#### *Basic information needed:*

- What is your name and date of birth?**
- How long have you been unicycling?**
- Which unicycling disciplines do you?**
- How would you rate your skill level?**
- Have you taken any skill tests? To what level?**

#### **Photo**

**How would you describe unicycling to someone who doesn't know what it is?**

**Do you see unicycling as a sport or a circus activity? Why do you see it as that?**

**Is it a lifestyle sport?**

**Does it matter to you what it is or how others see it?**

**What sports do you think it has similarities with?**

**Why do you unicycle? Now you can do it why do you still do it?**

**How do you feel when you are riding? (faces)**

**What motivates you to ride at the moment?**

**How would you describe your normal motivation levels**

- (continuum)

**How would you describe your levels of motivation when unicycling?**

**What do you like best about it?**

**What frustrates you most about it?**

**Is it important to you to be successful?**

**What do you think are the benefits of unicycling for you?**

**Has unicycling helped you in any other areas of life/activities?**

**What impact has unicycling had on you?**

**Do you think this is the same for other riders?**

- (Use list of potential benefits of sport as a prompt.)

**Have there been any negative outcomes of unicycling for you?**

**What?**

**Why?**

**Do you do other sports? What?**

How is unicycling different to these for you?

**Can you see any benefits that unicycling has given you that your other sports haven't? What are they?**

- Inclusion/exclusion

**What do people think about your unicycling?**

- Friends/family/teachers

Do you get any comments when you ride – how do they make you feel?

How would you describe yourself socially?

- Lots of friends, few close friends, loner....

Do you have friends who ride?

How do you keep in touch with them?

Do you feel competitive towards them – to learn tricks before they do....?

How do you feel towards other unicyclists? Oldies? Beginners?

## INTERVIEW 2: EARLY UNICYCLING - LEARNING TO RIDE

How old were you when you started unicycling?

How did you get into it?

**Why did you take it up?**

What did you know about before you started?

What appealed to you about it?

Was anybody influential in this? Who? How?

What support did you get from friends or family?

Did anyone try to discourage you?

How did you get your first unicycle?

**How did you learn to ride?**

- Books, DVDs, internet, peers, club.....

Was it difficult when you were beginning?

What motivated you to give it a try?

Why did you persevere? What kept you going?

**How did you feel when you kept falling off? (faces)**

**How did you feel when you first rode unsupported? (faces)**

What were the early benefits of unicycling for you?

Have these changed over time, as you've got better?

What impact did it have on you in the beginning?

**How would you describe your level of engagement at school/work?**

- (continuum)

**How was it different before you learnt to unicycle?**

- (continuum)

**Has unicycling affected your school/work in any way? How?**

**Would you like to be able to unicycle at school, as part of PE?**

How would you describe yourself? How do you see yourself?

- Image, identity, Do your friends know about your unicycling? Do you tell new people you meet?

Is it an important part of who you are? Why?

**How has it changed the way you see yourself?**

**Has it had any impact on your confidence? How? What?**

- self-esteem continuum – changed over time?

When you started unicycling how did you view it – sport, fun activity...? Has your view of it changed?

If you couldn't unicycle now would you still learn knowing everything that you do now about unicycling?



### INTERVIEW 3: FUTURE UNICYCLING - ASPIRATIONS

Do you think you'll carry on unicycling?

What unicycling would you like to do in the future?

Do you plan to take up any new disciplines?

**Are there any other sports you'd like to take up – yourself or at school/in the community? What?**

Have you been to any local, national, international meets?

Would you like to? Why?

How do you improve your skill level?

- Books, DVD, internet, peers

**Are skills tests important to you? Why? Competitions?**

Do you have any unicycling 'heroes/heroines'? Kris Holms?

Do you go on any of the unicycle forums?

Do you post on them?

**What impact/influence does the internet have on your unicycling? Your friends**

**What do you know about the unicycling culture/scene?**

How would you describe it?

Are you part of it?

Is it important to you/ Why? How?

**Can someone be part of the unicycling community if they can't ride?**

What do you know about the UUU/IFU?

Should unicycling be more organised? Why?

Do you buy new equipment regularly for unicycling?

How do you choose it? Is style/colour important?

Can you describe a particular 'look' for unicyclists? Dress?

Is this dependent on age?

What do you think the future is for unicycling?

If someone wanted to take up unicycling what would you say to them?

**Prompt Sheet on Level of Unicycling and Disciplines**

How would you describe your unicycling using the list below:

- Beginner
- Basic
- Intermediate
- Good
- Very good
- Advanced
- Excellent
- Other.....

What unicycling disciplines do you do?

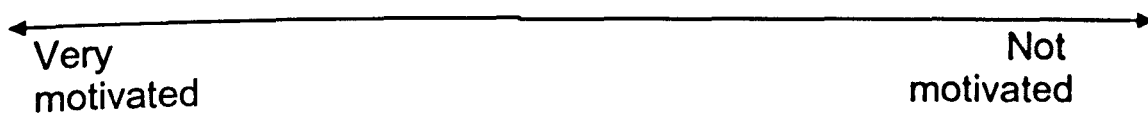
- Muni
- Trials
- Street
- Hockey
- Distance
- Freestyle
- Cross-country
- Circus skills
- Beginner – basic riding
- Other.....

**Prompt Sheet on Level of Motivation**

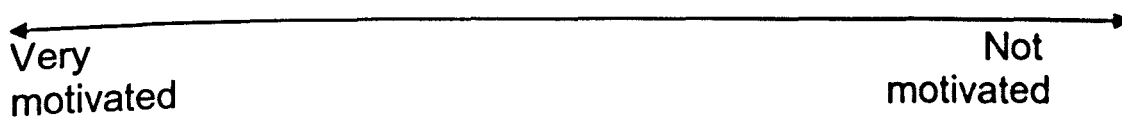
**Continuum of motivation**

1. Where on this line would you mark your **current level of motivation for unicycling?**

If you are very motivated mark yourself on the left.  
If you are not at all motivated mark yourself on the right.



2. Where on this line would you mark your **current level of motivation for school or work?**



3. Where on this line would you mark your level of motivation for school or work before you started unicycling?



## **Prompt Sheet on Perceived Benefits of Unicycling**

### **Possible benefits of sport**

**Has unicycling given you any of these benefits?**

#### **Personal**

- Helped you to have a full and meaningful life
- Helped to you to stay healthy
- Helped to you to manage any stress
- Raised your self-esteem and confidence
- Given you a positive mood – making you feel good or happy
- Given you a challenge
- Given you a sense of satisfaction
- Helped you to stop smoking, drinking or taking drugs

#### **Educational**

- Helped to you to get better grades at school
- Helped to you to do better at work
- Increased your concentration
- Increased your self-control
- Made you attend school or work more regularly

#### **Social**

- Helped to you make new friends and feel included
- Stopping any antisocial behaviour you had
- Strengthening friendships or communities bonds
- Getting to know people from different backgrounds, age groups
- Involving your community, locally or via the internet
- Developed your leadership or teaching skills

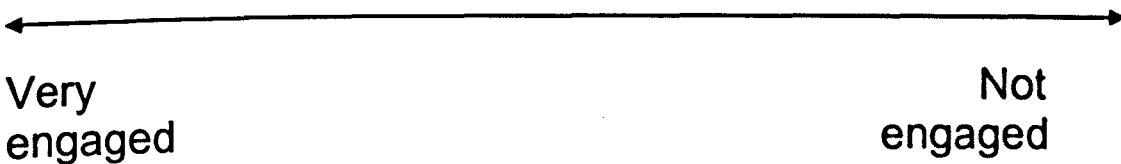
Prompt Sheet on Level of Engagement at School or work

**Continuum of engagement in school or work**

1. Where on this line would you mark yourself **now**?

If you are very engaged mark yourself on the left.

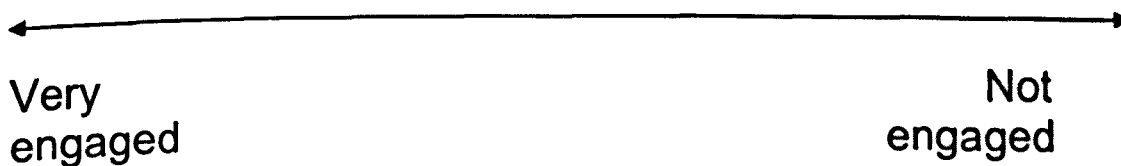
If you are not at all engaged mark yourself on the right.



2. Where on this line would you mark yourself **before you started unicycling**?

If you were very engaged mark yourself on the left.

If you were not at all engaged mark yourself on the right.



## **Appendix Two**

### **Sample Notes from Focus Groups**

## Notes from Focus Groups of Instructors/Supporters at UNICON XIV

(Notes have been compiled from both focus groups of instructors/supporters)

*All riders and teachers, except one whose daughters ride*

*10 participants from:*

*USA*

*Denmark*

*Holland*

*Austria*

*France*

*Australia*

*Germany*

*New Zealand*

General discussion around the themes of the study.

1. WB: Is unicycling a lifestyle sport? Does it meet the necessary criteria?

- France: please give us other examples of lifestyle sports.
- WB: skateboarding, BMX biking.
- USA: surfing.
- France: then yes, unicycling is like these.

Talked through each criteria with examples – was general agreement from the group that it did meet the criteria.

*UniSalg.dk (Unicycle.com Denmark), full page advert in UNICON programme  
"Unicycling is a lifestyle"*

2. WB: new unicyclists are motivated by small steps/goals from my observations. What are your experiences with new riders?

- Australia: Some kids come to the local club, learn, once they can ride they leave. Do others have this experience and can anyone suggest why this might be?
- Denmark: share this experience.
- USA: some clubs focus very much on beginners without realising; in such clubs once you can ride/do the basics there may not be much incentive to continue coming.
- Australia: not true of their club, they coach skills Level 4 and above.
- Denmark: the Danish unicycling organisation hold several weekends across the year for members from any club, many who are Level 4. It enables them to have some focussed tuition and to practise with their peers. It is very popular.
- USA: the club represented organises trips, etc for its members, that are not unicycling related, and so it provides more than just unicycling, it becomes a social club too. They find this is a good way to keep youngsters motivated to attend. In his experience if you learn to ride before you are 13 you are more likely to give it up/drop out in teens. If

you learn after you are 15 you are more likely to keep it up into adulthood.

- Australia: this relates to their club's experience.
- France: once someone can ride there may be no further motivation for them; they have achieved their goal; unless they feel intense personal satisfaction from the act of unicycling and motivate themselves further by the satisfaction and pleasure of riding.
- New Zealand: how do you get children to set their own goals at the very beginning/ You can encourage them to ride half a turn of the wheel or to the next lamppost unsupported but these are goals set by someone else.
- WB: does that matter if those goals still motivate?
- Denmark: not necessarily but then it can just become one more adult-set target for them and not their own motivation.
- New Zealand: sometimes when I teach in schools some kids don't want to learn and it is really hard to get them to do anything.
- WB: does that matter? Some children will be put off it as it looks so difficult, I don't think we should push them but encourage them as best we can.
- General agreement.
- France: it may have something to do with the teaching method. You can teach one-to-one, holding them up, you can teach them to do it against a wall, self-supporting or they can just launch themselves into it. In my experience those who just go for it tend to learn quicker but I don't agree with it as a teaching method so I have mixed views about how best to teach it.
- Denmark: the one-to-one is important as they have a close relationship with another person who is taking an interest in them. To me this is key.

*Once you can ride you very quickly become an expert – can teach someone else to ride.*

*Also possible to teach higher skills than you can do – you know what the learner must do technically and you can help them to realise and practise this.*

3. WB. Are there cultural/subcultural differences between the different disciplines?

- General agreement that there is by gender and so dress, body language, etc.
- Australia: There are definite cultural preferences for unicycling disciplines that are country and gender specific. E.g. girls: freestyle, boys: trials and street.
- New Zealand: disagrees with this, it is too generalised; selection is much more individual preference.
- WB: the competitors at UNICON events seem to represent country preferences; e.g. Germany: girls freestyle, France: boys street.
- Austria: there are virtually no local clubs in France so if someone wants to really get into unicycle they have to try to get the attention of Koxx



One. They market themselves at males and street/trials because there are greater marketing/selling opportunities here.

- France: so they have easily come to dominate French unicycling; perpetuate male domination of the sport.
- USA: UNICON is almost 50:50 male/female competitors. UNICON has become a great place to hook up! (added motivation to unicycle).

## Notes from Focus Group of Riders at UNICON XIV

*All female focus group – self selecting,  
2 Australia,  
1 USA  
Aged 15 to 22*

All of the advertising of unicycling products, the Uni mag, etc. is aimed at boys.

Its mainly about disciplines that boys do, trials, street, muni.  
The images are mostly of boys/men, taken by boys/men.  
We want something for girls.

Father who was attending suggested that this is because it is these disciplines where the wear and tear on the unicycles is greatest. Therefore there is more frequent need to replace parts and so better sales for the companies. There is a greater market for it. Research around other sports indicates that it is males invest more in sports equipment than families generally. In freestyle which is more popular with girls there is less likelihood of damage.

If all of the merchandising is aimed at boys, DVDs, etc who are your female role models in unicycling?

There aren't any. The last DVD we saw was all guys doing trials, street and muni. There was one short clip of a Japanese woman doing some really cool spins. It's great to watch the Japanese girls here – they have given us lots of ideas.

There is a group at home who works with young carers, does really exciting stuff with them like rock climbing and takes them out places. We would like to get them unicycling. It would be a really cool thing for them to do, something just for them. That's what they need; to feel special.

## **Appendix Three**

### **Questionnaires and Information for Respondents**

## Information for BUC Questionnaire Respondents



### Dear BUC Riders

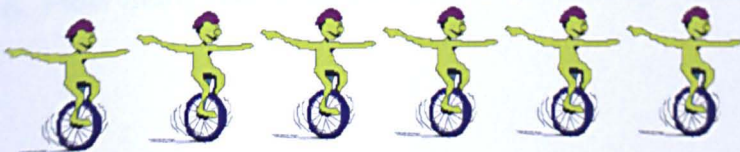
I am doing some research for my PhD into what motivates people to learn to ride a unicycle and the possible benefits of unicycling. Learning to ride a unicycle is a difficult skill to master. It is something which takes time, patience and perseverance. So what motivated you? Was it the challenge to yourself, the desire to be different from the crowd or something else? My interest in unicycling, as a committed non-rider, is based on endless hours spent watching others ride the strange-looking, one-wheeled contraption. I have watched its impact on the self-esteem of children, young people and adults over the last five years and it seems so significant to me that somebody should try to record it.

Please take five minutes to complete this questionnaire at the BUC by ticking the boxes or writing on the lines. When you have filled it in please put it in one of the boxes in the Unicycle.com shop, dining area, convention entrance or on the main stage. All responses are anonymous.

If you are interested in taking further part in my research please email me at [bignolw@hope.ac.uk](mailto:bignolw@hope.ac.uk). I am particularly keen to talk to you if you are 11 to 19 years old, have been riding for a year or more and are past Skill Level 1. You may keep this page for your information.

With many thanks

Wendy Bignold



BUC Questionnaire

1. Personal details: age: \_\_\_\_\_ years, male  female  (Tick)

2. How long have you been riding a unicycle, or learning? \_\_\_\_\_

3. Tick the skill level you feel best describes your unicycling (Tick only one)

<i>beginner</i>	<i>basic</i>	<i>intermediate</i>	<i>good</i>
<i>very good</i>	<i>advanced</i>	<i>excellent</i>	<i>other.....</i>

4. Tick the unicycling activities which you do (You may tick more than one box)

<i>Cross-country</i>	<i>Freestyle</i>	<i>Street</i>	<i>Trials</i>
<i>Circus skills</i>	<i>Distance</i>	<i>Speed</i>	<i>Muni</i>
<i>Basic (beginner)</i>	<i>Hockey</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Other</i>
		.....	.....

5. Briefly describe what motivated you to learn to ride or to want to learn to ride? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Tick any of the following statements which apply to you.

I wanted to learn to master a physical challenge.	
I wanted to learn to master a technical challenge.	
I wanted to learn to get fit or keep fit.	
I wanted to have a go at something fun.	
I wanted to have a go at something unusual.	
Someone challenged me to. Who?.....	

6. How many hours do you ride in an average week  or month?

7. How did you feel when you were learning to ride and kept falling off?

(Tick any box that applied to you - you may tick more than one box.)

Frustrated at falling off a lot.	
Depressed at not being able to ride.	
Wanted to give up as you couldn't do it?	
Pleased with small successes like a full turn of the wheel.	
Not bothered when you fell off as it is so difficult to learn.	

8. What motivates you to continue with your riding if you have passed the beginner stage? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

9. How would you describe your usual level of motivation?

(Tick one box in each column.)

Motivation for school or work		Motivation for unicycling	
Very highly motivated		Very highly motivated	
Highly motivated		Highly motivated	
Some motivation		Some motivation	
Low levels of motivation		Low levels of motivation	
Very low levels of motivation		Very low levels of motivation	

10. Where did you learn to ride? (You may tick more than one box.)

At school		At a circus club		At a unicycle club/meet	
On your own		At a youth club		Other.....	

### 11. Do you think that unicycling has had any positive effects on you?

(Tick any box that applies to you - you may tick more than one box.)

If you are under 14 please ask an adult to help you with this question.

	Yes	Very much
<b>Personal</b>		
Helped you to have a full and meaningful life		
Helped you to stay fit and healthy		
Helped you to manage any stress		
Raised your self-esteem and confidence		
Given you a positive mood - made you feel good		
Given you a challenge		
Given you a sense of satisfaction		
Helped you to stop smoking, drinking or taking drugs		
<b>Educational</b>		
Helped you to get better grades at school for example by increasing your motivation		
Helped you to do better at work for example by increasing your motivation		
Increased your concentration		
Increased your self-control		
Made you attend school or work more regularly		
<b>Social</b>		
Helped you make new friends and feel included		
Stopped any antisocial behaviour you had		
Strengthened friendships or communities bonds		
Got to know people from different backgrounds, age groups		
Involved your community, locally or via the internet		
Developed your leadership or teaching skills		

Please comment on any boxes you have ticked in the last question if you want to. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

(You may continue over the page.) *If there are any other comments you wish to make about unicycling please do so over the page.*



## Information for UNICON XIV Questionnaire Respondents



### Dear UNICON Riders

I am doing some research for my PhD into what motivates people to learn to unicycle and the benefits of unicycling. Learning to ride a unicycle is a difficult; it is something which takes time, patience and perseverance. So what motivated you? Was it the challenge to yourself, the desire to be different or something else?

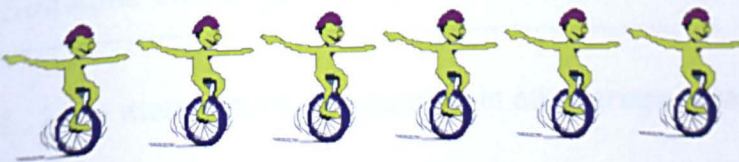
I have watched its impact on the self-esteem of children, young people and adults over the last five years and it seems so significant to me that somebody should record it.

Please take five minutes to complete this questionnaire at UNICON by ticking the boxes or writing on the lines. When you have filled it in please give it back to me or put it in one of the boxes you will see around the venues. All responses are anonymous.

If you are interested in taking further part in my research please email me at [bignolw@hope.ac.uk](mailto:bignolw@hope.ac.uk). I am particularly keen to talk to you if you are 11 to 19 years old, have been riding for a year or more and are past Skill Level 1. You may keep this page for your information.

With many thanks

Wendy Bignold





UNICON XIV Questionnaire

1. Personal details: age: \_\_\_\_\_ years, male  female  (Tick)

nationality: \_\_\_\_\_

2. How long have you been riding a unicycle, or learning? \_\_\_\_\_

3. Tick the skill level you feel best describes your unicycling (Tick only one.)

<i>beginner</i>	<i>basic</i>	<i>intermediate</i>	<i>good</i>	
<i>very good</i>	<i>advanced</i>	<i>excellent</i>	<i>other.....</i>	

4. Tick the unicycling activities which you do (You may tick more than one box.)

<i>Cross-country</i>	<i>Freestyle</i>	<i>Street</i>	<i>Trials</i>	
<i>Circus skills</i>	<i>Distance</i>	<i>Speed/Track</i>	<i>Muni</i>	
<i>Basic (beginner)</i>	<i>Hockey</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Other</i>	
		.....	.....	

5. Briefly describe what motivated you to learn to ride or to want to learn to ride? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Tick any of the following statements which apply to you.

I wanted to learn to master a physical challenge.	
I wanted to learn to master a technical challenge.	
I wanted to learn to get fit or keep fit.	
I wanted to have a go at something fun.	
I wanted to have a go at something unusual/different.	
Someone challenged me to. Who?.....	

6. How many hours do you ride in an average week  or month?

7. How did you feel when you were learning to ride and kept falling off?

(Tick any box that applied to you - you may tick more than one box.)

Frustrated at falling off a lot.	
Depressed at not being able to ride.	
Wanted to give up as you couldn't do it?	
Pleased with small successes, like a full turn of the wheel.	
Not bothered when you fell off as it is so difficult to learn.	

8. What motivates you to continue with your riding if you have passed the beginner stage? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

9. How would you describe your usual level of motivation?

(Tick one box in each column.)

Motivation for school or work		Motivation for unicycling	
Very highly motivated		Very highly motivated	
Highly motivated		Highly motivated	
Some motivation		Some motivation	
Low levels of motivation		Low levels of motivation	
Very low levels of motivation		Very low levels of motivation	

10. Where did you learn to ride? (You may tick more than one box.)

At school		At a circus club		At a unicycle club/meet	
On your own		At a youth club		Other.....	

**11. Do you think that unicycling has had any positive effects on you?**

(Tick any box that applies to you - you may tick more than one box.)

If you are under 14 please ask an adult to help you with this question.

	Yes	Very much
<b>Personal</b>		
Helped you to have a full and meaningful life		
Helped you to stay fit and healthy		
Helped you to manage any stress		
Raised your self-esteem and confidence		
Given you a positive mood - made you feel good		
Given you a challenge		
Given you a sense of satisfaction		
Helped you to stop smoking, drinking or taking drugs		
<b>Educational</b>		
Helped you to get better grades at school for example by increasing your motivation		
Helped you to do better at work for example by increasing your motivation		
Increased your concentration		
Increased your self-control		
Made you attend school or work more regularly		
<b>Social</b>		
Helped you make new friends and feel included		
Stopped any antisocial behaviour you had		
Strengthened friendships or communities bonds		
Got to know people from different backgrounds, age groups		
Involved your community, locally or via the internet		
Developed your leadership or teaching skills		

Please comment on any boxes you have ticked in the last question if you want to. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_ (You may continue over the page.)

*If there are any other comments you wish to make about unicycling please do so over the page.*

## **Appendix Four**

### **Information and Consent Form for Interviewees**

## Information for Potential Interviewees

### PhD Unicycle Research Project: Information for Interviewees

**What motivates young people to unicycle and how does this unusual skill impact on their self-esteem and engagement with school or work?**

My interest in unicycling, as a committed non-rider, is based on endless hours spent watching others ride the strange-looking, one-wheeled contraption. I have watched its impact on the self-esteem of children, young people and adults over the last five years and it seems so significant to me that somebody should try to record it and bring it to the attention of the wider sport and education communities so that unicycling is given the respect it really deserves.

My research plan is to talk to five young people 3 times each, either on 3 occasions or with just a short break in between. So there is a time commitment of 1 to 3 hours for those who are involved. I'd like to talk about their unicycling; things such as:

- why they do it
- how they got interested
- anybody who has influenced them – family, friends or other unicyclists
- how they felt when they were learning and they couldn't stay up-right
- whether unicycling is important to them and why
- what unicycling they'd like to do in the future
- whether they think unicycling is a sport or not
- whether they think unicycling has helped them at school or at work

I will conduct the interviews where the person chooses – this could be at his or her home - at a time and date that they choose. I hope to do the interviews between February and September. I plan do some observations of the people riding, at home, at a local club or at a national meet, wherever they are already riding. I am also interested in talking to friends and family. The information that I collect I will use to write a story about the rider.

All the information I collect will be anonymised. I won't name any of the people I interview or observe.

Wendy Bignold  
bignoldw@hope.ac.uk

**Consent Form for Interviewees**

**PhD Unicycle Research Project: Consent Form**

If you are willing to take part please sign below as a record of your consent. I will send you a copy of the story that I write based on your interview. You will be able to make comments on it or raise any concerns you have with my interpretation of your experiences.

**You may withdraw from the project at any time.**

Name:.....  
....

Signature:.....  
.....

Signature of parent/carer (if under  
18):.....

Date of birth:.....

Many thanks

Wendy Bignold



## **Appendix Five**

### **Sample of Interview Transcripts and Initial Coding**

Full Transcript of Interview 1 with Max

**Max, Interview 1, 01/03/07, 4.30 pm, Pontypridd**

W. OK, can you tell me your name and date of birth.

M. Yeh, my name is \_\_\_\_\_ and its 27<sup>th</sup> February 1983.

W. OK thanks Max and we're doing this on 1<sup>st</sup> March, 2007. Max how long have you been unicycling? How many years?

M. Ah, (pause) probably 1994, Christmas.

W. OK!

M. So....

W. So, how long...

M. So... probably 1995 onwards..... 12 years.

W. OK, so how old were you when you started?

M. 94... I was 12.

W. OK!

M. Just coming up to 13.

W. OK! Well which unicycle disciplines do you do? I don't know if it helps you look at that list there, but I'm interested in the different unicycle disciplines you do.

M. Yeh, I'd say distance, like Coker, but that would be more off road than on road, like Red Bull and, you know, Manchester to Blackpool... muni. I have done trials but it's not the sort of thing I'd really do now. I was in uni at the time and had a friend who was into trials biking so....he sort of introduced me to that but if I did meet anyone round here it would be that but its not really. I'd say mostly distance.

W. OK! How would you rate your skill level going off those Maxcriptors at the top.

M. Aah...I don't know....umm, I'm alright...sort of distance wise I'd probably say advanced, about, you know, in both cases. Probably long distance road riding and off road and muni probably the same and I'd say if you were asking me to do trials on it then I'd say basic, intermediate.

W. OK, OK! Have you taken any of the skill levels tests?

M. (Laughs) No, I've not!

W. No, OK, fine, OK! Have you got a photo that you'd like to show me that might be a good starting point?

M. Yeh, I've got two. You've already seen one of them but this one is a slightly earlier one. It was the first time I did Mountain Mayhem, so that would have been...I think it was 2003. That one was the year before. *(He points to other photo which was taken in 2006).*

W. So how old were you in that one?

M. 2003... I can't keep track...(laughs). I was 24 in 2007 so 4 years ago I was.....20.

W. Yeh, OK, so 20. Why is that photo important to you? Why have you chosen that one?

M. This is quite funny...cause that was, you know, ever since, before that, before I suppose 2001 when I went to uni, I didn't sort of know other unicyclists existed almost, cause when I first started riding I just had the basic unicycle you know then and I just sort of rode it back and forth to school and



occasionally rode it in to town and I was doing that for about 9 years before I even knew there was a sort of community there.

W. Oh, right.

M. It was... that was slightly before the internet became so popular, etc. etc. and possibly my first ever Mountain Mayhem I went with a cyclist and he said you'll see some unicyclists cause he used to go and watch it every year and I met someone then and had a go on one and that was it you know... So I probably went to watch in 2001 and then I realized there was a wider community and bought one shortly afterwards and it went from there.

W. OK, OK, so that's how...

M. So that picture is significant in the sense that that was the first year that I really rode and knew what was involved almost. So before then I didn't ride with a helmet. You can see I had to borrow a helmet.

W. Yeh, yeh!

M. You can see I've got no camelback or anything...

W. You've got no pads or anything.

M. No, no pads, just normal trousers, not padded shorts or anything.

W. OK

M. I didn't know what to expect or anything. It was quite amazing cause I actually did quite well that year. It was the first time that I actually rode a cocker off road.

W. Right

M. And I'd only had it for a couple of months before that.....

W. Right, and now that has become pretty much an annual event for you hasn't it?

M. Yes,

W. So I guess the race is quite significant for you.

M. Yeh, yeh it's good ... riding with other people. You know the reason why I ride is sort of to push myself. Its not to look... you know, whatever it is... It's a fitness thing you know... I've always got the attitude that it is to win. Every lap I go out I'm planning to win it you know. I know it's stupid 'cause I know we're only going to beat a few bike teams.

W. Are you planning to win it over those other riders or to, kind of, win it yourself over the previous lap that you do or over the previous year?

M. Yeh, both. I'm trying to beat as many people as I can and to beat what I've done but that's the same with all sports that I do you know, even if its.....stupid, if someone else is ridiculously better than you I still go for it with the attitude that I'm going to win

W. And is that the same.....with other unicyclists as well? Do you want to beat them?

M. Yeh, you know in anyone in general I'm out there to win, not there you know take it slowly...It's not in my mind set almost to just pootle around.

W. And is it about winning? Is it about being the best rather than, kind of getting an actual award or a, you know, certificate or recognition?

M. Yeh

W. Is it that sense of winning?

M. Yes, hence I've not done any of the skills levels or any of that. I suppose it doesn't really interest me. Its just you know more for the fitness side of things

... so

W. You said that you do other sports. What other sports do you do?

M. Well I play squash fairly seriously now, er... climbing, rock climbing.

W. Um hum.

M. That's quite interesting 'cause something like rock climbing... its just that, that is quite different. When I was younger karate was a big part of what I'd done. That was the same. I always wanted to be the best in that, best in the club, best in the area...I liked competing and stuff so that was the same but climbing is a different sport in that sense.

W. Yeh

M. Yeh

W. And squash and karate... and I know that you do ordinary road cycling. Those are like unicycling. They are all individual sports.

M. No. None of them are team sports...no.

W. So, are you attracted by the fact that it (unicycling) is something that you do on your own, that you are not reliant on somebody else or affected by someone else's performance.

M. Yeh, I suppose. I've never thought about that but I suppose it makes training easier. If I want to go out for a ride I can just do that. I haven't got to get the whole team together. I'd say it's more about training. I like to just go out and do it. I suppose with football and rugby and stuff you've got to do it at set times. Yeh, the karate was the same. Training was at set times but outside shows were when I wanted to do them.

W. And, um, you know you say that you kind of train as and when you want and um.... and ... some people engage in unicycling on an individual basis, as and when they want to, and aren't really bothered about regional meets, national meets and stuff. Do you tend to do it as an individual or do you like the opportunity to do it as part of a group as and when

M. Yeh, no, yeh ... I do like the sort of meets but not to a massive extent. You know some of them are good, things like the Red Bull but that's probably because I'm competing. I don't like the faffage of normal meets almost, 'cause you know there's a lot of unicyclists that go slow you know, stop for cakes and pies and stop for a beer, you know...

W. Ah ha...

M. I don't want to stand around eating cakes. I think you should ride quick whatever you do. Ride, don't stand around...

W. I see, so you don't like to be held back by others, like if there is a big group of you. Is there also an element that um you know... you're not as interested in the kind of organised side of it. You want to be spontaneous and do it when you want to and ... kind of at your speed. And ...

M. Yeh, I suppose, yeh. It's like yeh. It's not like ... I like mixing with people. It's not like.... You know what I mean!

W. Yeh

M. I like the social side of things but then when I'm riding I want to actually get on and ride ...

W. Yeh

M. ... rather than go slow and chatty or whatever.

W. Yeh, OK. Um, we talked a bit about other sports, How would you Maxcribe unicycling to somebody who doesn't know what it is? .... How might you Maxcribe it?

M. Uum ..... Yeh, unicycling it's... You know, people know what it is instantly, a unicycle and it is still generally related to ... people think circus and you know I was talking to someone today just in conversation and I was telling him I sometimes ride 60 miles a day and he said what on a unicycle! You know once you have a little bit of conversation you can usually explain that there's more to it than a clown riding around the ring.

W. Yeh ...

M. It's more than that!

W. So umm .... How would you Maxscribe unicycling? Do you see it as a sport or as a circus act?

M. Yeh, yeh, a sport, I see it as a sport. It's a sport that I do. Yeh, you know obviously it draws massive parallels to cycling. Now, I don't make a massive thing about my unicycling. If I'm having a conversation I'll say yeh I do cycling... the, normally, the first question is, sort of, what style of riding do you do? What sort of bike have you got? It's normally the second question before people find out it's unicycling. You know that almost gets you going. People can switch off though. You know you had the same thing with your PhD when you started and you didn't mention unicycling but said you were looking at a 'sport'.

W. Yeh ...

M. To say cycling and you're quite into it but it might be the next time you speak to this person that they actually realise that you do unicycling ... not a bike!

W. And how do they respond then?

M. Yeh, you obviously get mixed responses. Some are surprised, which is expected, um yeh, then some people don't believe. They think you're lying about what you can actually do or whatever ... Sometimes that's, you know, annoying or whatever. You're telling people and you get the reaction where they say "Oh you can't do that; surely not!" But then I've been stuck up for a couple of times by bikers that I ride with. Sometimes I meet other riders somewhere and I just show up on my unicycle. It's like "Surely he's not coming" ... and it's "Yeh he is!"

W. And, and um... How do you react when people either don't believe you or either they're amazed or other bikers are impressed by what you do?

M. You know, it's good.

W. Is that important to you? Do you enjoy that?

M. No, I don't necessarily like the fuss side of things. I don't do it to get people going "Oh well done!" and all of that. It's really terrible. You know I don't really know why, well I do know how it started but it's not ... The occasional comment is nice but you always get the idiots.

W. But it doesn't really bother you, kind of how the public respond; whether its positive or negative?

M. No, no ... It's nice to get the occasional good comment. Mainly the best comments you actually get are from bikers, you know, you ... Even if you're passed or you pass someone on the bike they appreciate how hard it is. They're riding the same course on a bike and they've actually got general respect for you. It's people who don't ride who, you know, occasionally they're the idiots!

W. So you say, you know, you don't ride to get good comments from people but if a biker who's doing the same race as you makes a positive comment, is that something that encourages you or you're pleased by?

M. Yeh! You know it's a compliment! It's not a bad thing! Accept the compliment and ... (pause).

W. OK, OK. You said that you thought, you know unicycling has obviously got parallels to cycling. Do you see it as having any parallels to some of the new lifestyle sports like skateboarding or do you see any similarities to the climbing that you do or...

M. Certain areas of unicycling are particularly for younger people, you know, like trials, street, and that is obviously similar to skateboarding. You know you do get people who go down the skatepark on their unicycle. There is probably a direct comparison there and it is classed as an extreme sport. Whereas your distance isn't an extreme sport, or your muni, but it can be sometimes. Things like Red Bull aren't. They're more cross-country. But when it's down hill, hard muni and you drop, its more extreme. I suppose you've got cross- country down hill. It's a similar group of people to who hang round the skatepark and you've got your stereotypes... your sub-culture in a sense.

W. And do you think that there are certain types of unicycling that are more appealing to young people and why might that be?

M. Yeh, there's always ... Yeh, your trials is definitely your new trendy thing to do. Everyone wants to do trails. ...Peter at uni he could do bunny hops and stuff but he couldn't actually ride more than 10 metres!

W. Right!

M. You know, he was quite happy jumping around on it and so that was how he learnt.

## Coding for Max, Interview 1

### Unicycling as a sport

*How would you describe unicycling?*

"... You know, people know what it is instantly, a unicycle and it is still generally related to ... people think circus and you know I was talking to someone today just in conversation and I was telling him I sometimes ride 60 miles a day and he said what on a unicycle! You know once you have a little bit of conversation you can usually explain that there's more to it than a clown riding around the ring."

*Do you see it as a sport or as a circus act?*

"Yeh, yeh, a sport, I see it as a sport. It's a sport that I do. Yeh, you know obviously it draws massive parallels to cycling."

*Do you see it as having any parallels to some of the new lifestyle sports like skateboarding or do you see any similarities to the climbing that you do or...*

"Certain areas of unicycling are particularly for younger people, you know, like trials, street, and that is obviously similar to skateboarding. You know you do get people who go down the skatepark on their unicycle. There is probably a direct comparison there and it is classed as an extreme sport. Whereas your distance isn't an extreme sport, or your muni, but it can be sometimes. Things like Red Bull aren't. They're more cross-country. But when it's down hill, hard muni and you drop, its more extreme. I suppose you've got cross- country down hill. It's a similar group of people to who hang round the skatepark and you've got your stereotypes... your sub-culture in a sense."

### Benefits of unicycling

*What benefits do you feel unicycling gives you? You've already said it keeps you fit and healthy. Do you see any other benefits, particularly at your current skill level?*

I've met new friends – a different social circle almost.....

*(prompt with research list)*

I suppose it is quite individual – I don't do it for that – you get more comments which is nice.

The balance always help; when I was doing karate that crossed over, the balance.

Reducing stress, taking my mind off things.

Given a challenge, it was a challenge to learn and now to get better.

Definitely from the social side of things it's helped me make new friends.

Being individual it gives you something to talk about instantly and helps you make friends easily. You've got to be a fairly open minded person, an extrovert. You know why not just ride a bike. The more extraverted things is to keep riding...

*Do you get anything particular from unicycling that you don't get from other sports?*

It is less boring than cycling. You can get faster on a bike, like going down hill, but I do generally find it boring. Road unicycling is a different type of fitness – you can't max out.... Off road unicycling, that's quite hard, with the hills in quick succession....

## **Motivation**

*Why do you ride?*

As a method of transport and to keep fit.

*Why do you still do it?.....*

You can always get better at it, so there's no reason to stop... I was always motivated at the start.

Yeh, yeh it's good ... riding with other people. You know the reason why I ride is sort of to push myself. Its not to look... you know, whatever it is... It's a fitness thing you know... I've always got the attitude that it is to win. Every lap I go out I'm planning to win it you know. I know it's stupid 'cause I know we're only going to beat a few bike teams.

*How would you describe your normal levels of motivation?*

I always want to get something done...Very highly motivated.

*Are you more motivated when you're unicycling?*

Very motivated, once I've started then it kicks in and I want to get better, or go as quick as possible.

*Can you try to sum up what you like best about unicycling?*

It is a skill, something I can do and do well so why not push it that bit more...

I do class it as harder than riding a bike so that's different; an added challenge almost. Its good fun.

I like riding in heavy traffic – its almost an adrenalin rush, swerving between cars and stuff... and when a compliment comes that's good and you've gotta take-it.

I don't like relying on other people... that's why I don't do team sports I guess... The team is good but it adds that level of 'faff' that I don't like.

I am organised and like to know what I'm doing and when.

I do like to go out and just ride – the organisation is just more when I'm with other people.

*So, are you attracted by the fact that it (unicycling) is something that you do on your own, that you are not reliant on somebody else or affected by someone else's performance.*

"Yeh, I suppose. I've never thought about that but I suppose it makes training easier. If I want to go out for a ride I can just do that. I haven't got to get the whole team together. I'd say it's more about training. I like to just go out and do it."

*How many times a week might you ride?*

On a daily basis, 5 miles day. Normally I'd get out for a long ride on a weekend, 20 or 30 miles; at least an extra 2 evenings plus the weekend.

*Has your injury changed your attitude towards unicycling?*

It's made me more enthusiastic – I've not ridden for 8 months so I'm itching to get back on.

*Are there elements of unicycling that are psychological?*

Climbing is more of an extreme sport. Your trails, that's psychological. There's a certain element of danger. I don't even think about falling off on road riding. I don't get an adrenalin rush for that. Even your extreme muni your difficult stuff, your drops, that's more psycho...

I like to go to unicycling events just to see people, see friends, as much as after the riding as for the riding.

As I'm a lot better than other people I just want to get on and ride.....  
I do like going on the meets. I like the friends.

## **Culture/identity**

*What do your friends think of it? How do they respond to it?*

You get different responses. Some say why the hell are you doing out.....  
Other bike riders are generally interested in it. They've seen us at Red Bull or somewhere.

Even random people in the street sometimes shout you "Can I have a go." It doesn't do any harm... getting people into it.

It's part of who I am. ..Everyone around knows I do...I commute to work on it. It's part of me. I'm the guy who unicycles. It's definitely part of my identity...  
Yer, I do like it, it doesn't bother me. It does make you slightly more individual.....

*How would you describe your attitude to life?*

Always ambitious, I do want to achieve stuff, whether it is unicycle quicker, brew a better beer or complete a PhD.  
Very laid back, easy going, take things as they come,... laid back, relaxed.

*How would you rate your skill level going off those descriptors at the top.*

"Aah...I don't know....umm, I'm alright...sort of distance wise I'd probably say advanced, about, you know, in both cases. Probably long distance road riding and off road and muni probably the same and I'd say if you were asking me to do trials on it then I'd say basic, intermediate."

*Do you class yourself as one of the best riders in the UK, cause you obviously are?*

Yer, I guess so, I don't say it but...you've got to think bout different disciplines, but yer road riding... cross-country but possibly muni.

*How would you Describe other unicyclists?*

You've got to draw a line about stereotypes. In a bad sense almost, I consider me as one of the normal unicyclists. There's a normal bunch and then there's a less normal bunch,...

I suppose the dress is one thing. I don't know what I mean...

*Is it age related? Do you regard some of the youth as less normal?*

Yes, I suppose in the sense... Normal isn't the right word. Yeh the dress, you've got like the skaters, that's your trial riders; hoodies, cool tops,...

Obviously it's (unicycling) a different personality as it is extravert.

*And do you think that there are certain types of unicycling that are more appealing to young people and why might that be?*

"Yeh, there's always ... Yeh, your trials is definitely your new trendy thing to do. Everyone wants to do trails. ...Peter at uni he could do bunny hops and stuff but he couldn't actually ride more than 10 metres!"

*Tell me about the two photos you've chosen.*

The old picture was when id didn't have a clue what was going on. I'd borrowed a helmet.... It's the equipment you need. I think people get too hang up on what pedals or cranks they need. Even at quite a high level. The equipment is a lot less vital. You can get a lot better just by riding another 5 miles a week. That's always been one of the good things that the unicycle is quite basic...



**Full Transcript of Interview with Scott**

**Scott Rhodes, d.o.b.: 4/12/93**

Date of interview: 9/12/07

Place of interview: Scott's house

Mum present at interview,

W. So we are going to talk tonight about your unicycling but we're going to start off with a photo. Can you show me a photo you've chosen Jack and tell me about it?

*(Photo is of him and his dad, brother and sister, all on unicycles in photo studio. All laughing.)*

S. We're all in it!

W. It's a family photo..... Is that important?

S. Yer!

W. You look quite young in that; how old were you?

S. Ah..... (looks at mum) ten, yer ten.

W. And how old are you now?

S. Fourteen, fourteen.

W. Jack can you tell me about the unicycling you do, or have done, what kind of unicycling do you do?

S. Hockey.

W. Just hockey?

S. Yer.

W. What is it about hockey that you enjoy?

S. Scoring goals... yer, scoring goals

W. Does anybody else in your family play hockey?

S. Yer, Ben and Dad.

W. Is that important? Do you like that?

S. Yer... a bit, we're all together doing it.

W. Which hockey team do you play for?

S. The DUC.

W. And do you have a particular position?

S. Yer, striker.

W. Is that your favourite position?

S. Yer.

W. What position does your dad play? And Ben?

S. Me dad plays goalkeeper and Ben defence.

W. How would you describe unicycling to someone who didn't know it?

S. It's a sport..... cause you 'ave to be fit to do it.

W. How would you describe it to someone who'd never seen it? What do you have to do?

S. You 'ave to 'ave good balance; you ride on one wheel.

W. Does it matter to you whether people think it's a sport or a circus thing?

S. Na!

W. When you're riding or playing hockey how do you feel? Describe it to me.  
 S. Fun, but tiring as well.  
 W. Do you enjoy it? Why do you enjoy it?  
 S. It makes me proud of me.  
 W. You said it's fun....  
 S. Yer, you 'ave to be focussed; go fast; get the ball.

W. Can you think what you like best about unicycling?  
 S. Scoring goals.  
 W. And what frustrates you the most?  
 S. .... losing!  
 W. Do you think you take it quite seriously?  
 S. A bit, yer!  
 W. So if you like winning, are the team you play for, the DUC, is it good?  
 S. A bit!

W. So how did you feel about the last hockey tournament, the big one, cause they did quite well?  
 S. Yer, came fourth or fifth...  
 W. Out of eleven teams?  
 S. Yer!

W. is there anything you think your unicycling has helped you to do? You said earlier that you had to be focussed? Did it make you focussed?  
 S. Yer.  
 W. How would you describe your normal levels of motivation? Are you someone who tries really hard at things?  
 S. A bit... I guess.  
 W. What about other sports, do you try hard with those?  
 S. Yer.  
 W. can I ask you mum what she thinks?  
 S. Yer.  
 M. Yes, he is motivated in sport.

*Look at motivation continuum.*

W. Does anybody at school know you ride?  
 S. Not teachers, a few people...  
 W. Do you like them to know?  
 S. Doesn't bother me.  
 W. What do you think they think of it?  
 S. Think it's funny..... riding around on one wheel.  
 W. Have they seen you ride it?  
 S. No.  
 W. Would you like them to know about it? When your team did well in the tournament the other week, would you like people to know about that?  
 S. My friends know; depends who it is. Not the teachers,..... not bothered.  
 M. Your teachers did know at primary school cause you did a talent show. The last couple of years there Jack rode his unicycle; did a little sequence with another lad who rode, in the talent show, at primary.

W. OK, perhaps we'll come back to that. Now you're at high school is it not cool for your friends to know?

S. I'm not bothered.

W. How would your teachers describe you? Would they say you work hard?

S. Yer, a bit....

W. What other sports do you do at the moment?

S. Basketball, football.

W. Have you ever played unicycle basketball? That's quite popular in Germany I think.

S. No, don't know.

W. Is unicycling different for you to your other sports? Do you feel differently about it?

S. Yer, cause I'm better at unicycling than I am at football and basketball.

W. Oh, are you? Why do you think that is?

S. Cause I practise more..... I went to the club every week.

W. You've been to the BUC a few times. Did you like that?

S. Yer, it's fun.

W. Why?

S. I played hockey, stayed up late...

W. Your dad and brother ride; doesn't your sister ride?

S. She did, a bit....

M. Can I say something?

W. Scott?

S. Yer.

M. You did use to go out riding round here, all of you, round the streets here. Don't you remember?

S. No!

M. It was a few years ago! They used to be known as the family that unicycles. People would say things about clowns which Stuart doesn't like.

W. OK, great. How would you describe yourself socially Jack; do you like lots of friends?

S. Yer...

W. How do you feel towards other unicyclists, when you're at the club?

S. Good, it's good they're learning to do it.

W. How do you feel towards other hockey players, people like Roger who are good?

S. He's mint!

W. Because?

S. Because he wins it a lot and he passes.

*Look at list of possible benefits of sport.*

W. Is there anything on that list that you think unicycling might have done for you.

S.....stay healthy..... it's a challenge

W. Can you remember when you first started unicycling? How old were you?

S. About eight?

M. Yer.

W. So that's nearly six years ago and did your dad have one already?

S. Yer.

W. Did you ask for a unicycle or did someone give it to you? Can you remember or can Mum?

M. We bought you one?

W. Were you pleased?

S. It was cool to have one.

W. Can you remember whether you practised a lot? How it felt to learn?

S. Didn't we put them two chairs together (pointed at dining table nearby).

M. Oh yer.

S. We put them chairs together and I rode between them.

M. You learnt very quickly.

S. Did I?.....

M. It only took him about a day.

W. Your mum said you took it into primary school. Can you remember anything about that?

S. Not much.

M. Everyone was amazed by it, 'cause you don't see it very often. You took it into the playground and rode round on it.

W. What do you think people thought?

S. Don't know; it was funny.

M. But you won didn't you.

S. Yer, yer I think so.

W. And what did your teachers think?

S. They thought it was good – yer.

W. In hockey people fall off a lot don't they? Do you get frustrated by that?

S. Yer, a bit, if I could've got the ball.

M. You don't fall off that much though do you? Actually?

S. I do!

W. Do you watch any unicycling DVDs or stuff?

S. Yer, a bit.

W. With your dad or on your own?

S. With Ben and Dad.

W. Ones with Chris Holm and that?

S. Yer.

W. Mum, do you remember when he was learning if he got frustrated much?

M. No, not really, he learnt so quickly.... It really helped his concentration and his balance. I don't remember him coming off it a lot. You just seemed to get on it and do it.

W. And what's your attitude to the family unicycling? Stuart and Jack?

M. I think it's great. They're doing a sport together. They do get funny comments but it's great!

W. You said you thought it had helped his concentration. Do you think that's helped him with his football and other things?

M..... yer, yer.

W. How would you describe yourself to someone who didn't know you? What sort of things are you in to?

S. Going out....

W. With your mates? Would you describe yourself as sporty or more into music?

S. A bit of both, music and sport.

W. What kind of music do you like?

S. Like Oasis... rock.

M. You play the guitar, don't you?

W. Do you think unicycling appeals to certain types of people?

S. Ner, don't know.....

W. What about street or trails unicycling?

S. No.

M. I do, I think it appeals to a certain type. It's like skateboarders especially being more recognised now than it was, especially like this extreme unicycling. It appeals to that sort that like that extreme and that was how you used to dress, your hoodies and your loud music and such, but your dress sense has changed. They've got the same style as skateboarders, the street cred and the loud music; that type of person.

W. If someone new moved into your class, Jack, would you tell them about your unicycling or that you played guitar?

S. Guitar!

W. Why do you think that is?

S. ... 'cause more people know about music and guitars than know what a unicycle is!

W. Mum, do you think unicycling is an important part of Jack, of who he is?

M. Umm, no not really, not now, it was, but not now.

W. What is it that's changed then for you? Why have you moved away from unicycling do you think?

S. It's.... I don't really enjoy it a lot now...

W. Can you describe why that is? Do you think you bored with it or you'd rather be doing other things?

S. I got bored. I got bored and I'd rather be playing football.

W. Ok and is there anything particular, you know, when you.... Was it gradual or did you suddenly get interested in football because of a particular match you watched? Was there a particular point at which....

S. A bit, but I've always liked football; played it at weekends.

W. Can Mum remember any more about that?

M. Ummm

W. Because you know, somebody hurts themselves badly and you know....

M. No, nothing like that. I think he's just grown out of it. He prefers other sports to unicycling. I don't think Jack would say it but with your group of friends I don't know if it is cool to unicycle and I think that's why you probably don't say that you unicycle?

W. What kind of things are your friends into?

S. Going out, hanging about....

W. When the club was really busy, at its height, did you have friends from school, or round here, or cousins who were learning?

S. Yer.

W. And they've stopped now or left the club.

S. Yer.

W. But you wouldn't talk to them or other friends about when you all used to ride.

S. Ner.

W. Do you think Jack, that your unicycling, particularly two or three years ago, or even a year ago, has it had any impact on you, your confidence? The fact that you could do something quite difficult...?

S. A bit... I thought I could learn other things quickly....

W. You thought you could learn other things quickly 'cause you learnt that quickly?

S. Yer!

W. Do you have any sense, Mum, that it helped his confidence say?

M. Yer, his confidence, yer.

W. Describe to me again why you're not unicycling now.

S. 'Cause I'm bored, it's boring. I'd rather go out and play football.

W. OK and why football particularly?

S. 'Cause it's a new sport to play.

W. And have you got friends at school that you play with?

S. Yer.

W. And do you play for a local club?

S. Yer, Rangers.

W. And how many times do you play or practise a week for them?

S. Practise on Wednesdays and play on Saturdays.

W. And some of your school mates play for them?

S. Yer.

W. OK.... And, um, are there any other sports that you'd like to do or take up?

S. Basketball.

W. OK, you play a bit of that already. Do you play that at school?

S. Yer.

W. And you play football at school.

S. Well, outside.

W. Do you play basketball for the school team?

S. Yer.

W. 'Cause you're tall.

W. Have you ever done skateboarding?

S. I tried it but it didn't really happen for me.

W. What about BMX biking?

S. Yer, I like to ride around.

M. You trashed your bike.

S. Yer.

W. What kind of bike was that?

S. BMX.

W. And could you do any tricks on that?

S. I tried, but I couldn't really get anywhere (laughed), so I just rode it round!

W. Why did you like going to the club or why did you go to the club?

S. 'cause my friends were there and I could unicycle there.

W. OK!

W. Do you think if more people knew about it they might try it?

S. They might try. I'm not sure if they'd stay with it.

W. Because?

S. Some people could get bored with it.

W. Do you mean they'd get bored once they'd learnt or trying to learn?

S. Trying to learn.

W. How would you describe unicyclists?

S. A bit crazy!

W. Scott, if someone who couldn't ride came to you for advice on learning what would you say to them?

S. Try and look for a club ... Don't do tricks before you can ride.

W. Scott, is there anything else that you want to say about unicycling?

S. It was fun, before, but not any more.

W. Mum is there anything else that you want to say about Jack and his riding or....

M. I just think you've grown out of it now.... Probably he wasn't pushed into it but introduced to it by Ian and he was interested in it for quite a long time, like especially when his friends were there and his cousin came to the club who was quite a bit older and he learnt to unicycle and he is of the type, at his age, he's 21, that I would associate with unicycling, a masher. Whilst you did it I think it was good for you. I think it did focus him and like I said, it did improve his coordination... and it was a good way of keeping fit. But he's just grown away from it.

W. OK, OK; thank you.