

GET WEIRD

Peculiar Pastimes

Underwater Hockey, Slackliners, Unicycle-riding Jugglers, and a 225-foot Long Zip Line

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WHAT COULD THESE THINGS POSSIBLY ALL HAVE IN COMMON?

The first three are closely knit student organizations at the University of Florida — small but strong groups brought together by their weird passions. The last can be found at a high ropes course that you (yes, you) can make group reservations for — if you dare.

While the idea of walking on a slackline may seem uncomfortable and the thought of someone hurling juggling pins at your head sounds potentially life threatening, don't be so quick to write these hobbies off. Each of these activities can be daunting in their own ways, but the members of these organizations are more than willing to show you the (sometimes literal) ropes.

Yes, it's a real sport: An inside look at bewildering world of UF Underwater Hockey

"Sticks up!"

"Ready, go!"

And they're off, kick, kick, kicking across the width of the pool to get to the center, water splashing everywhere. It's a frenzy to get to the puck first, and then to somehow knock it into the opposing team's goal — all while avoiding a smack to the face from a flipper and, most importantly, remembering to surface for air.

This is the start of a typical scrimmage held by the UF Underwater Hockey team. The coed group meets year-round at the Florida Pool two times a week to practice, sharing the space with a team of

Underwater Hockey is not only a UF sport, but also a worldwide phenomenon, as seen in this image from the Australian 2014 underwater hockey championships.

As a co-ed intramural club sport, the UF underwater hockey team accepts members from all ages, skill levels and genders. Fins, flippers, goggles and masks are provided so potential team members only need to bring a swimsuit, Gator ID card and sense of adventure.



synchronized swimmers. With the athletic focus at UF firmly fixed upon football, basketball and gymnastics, not a lot of people are talking about underwater hockey; many are not even aware that it's an actual thing. But despite the fact that it may not be the most popular sport in the United States, underwater hockey is played in many other countries around the world. At UF, underwater hockey is club sport that any member of the student body, faculty or staff can be a part of (for instance, the oldest member of the team is Greg Mullersman, a 56-year-old computer programmer at UF Health).

Now that it's established that underwater hockey (UH) is an activity that really does exist, let's get down to the dynamics of gameplay. The sport is played by two co-ed teams of six. Sheet metal troughs located on opposite sides of the pool function as goals. Players don equipment consisting of flippers, swim caps, goggles and snorkels — all provided by the club. Referees (typically two or three) swim along under the water, watching the game unfold through a spray of bubbles and signaling players with specific hand motions. And as with other sports, substitutes swim in and out to mix things up.

President of the club, Ian Hoek Spaans, a 20-year-old mechanical engineering major, has been playing underwater hockey since he came to UF three years ago. As a life-guard in high school, he would sometimes see underwater hockey pickup games played at the pool where he worked. When he came to UF and heard that they had a club team, he joined immediately.

Unlike its street and ice counterparts, underwater hockey is a non-contact sport. However, participants can still get fairly battered. Spaans pointed out a bruise the size of a quarter on his forehead, and after a scrimmage, Mullersman said that he once had his finger dislocated.

"This is the only sport that I know of where you can get kicked and it's not a foul," Mullersman said.

As if the threat of getting whapped by a rogue flipper isn't enough, players must wear special gloves made at team glove-making parties to protect their hands from getting scraped on the bottom of the pool. But despite the potential for injury, the players keep coming back. Garrett McGee, 20, has been playing underwater hockey for two years. Before transferring to UF, a professor at Santa Fe

College recommended the sport.

"I told him 'There's no way I'm playing that,'" McGee said. But later, his professor called him and told him to come try it. McGee had so much fun that he returned for another scrimmage. He's been an active member of the team ever since.

There are many misconceptions about the sport that prevent prospective players from trying it, but the biggest is that people need to be able to hold their breath for long periods of time. It's true that most members of the team are "water people" and have prior experience as swimmers (take Spaans for example — he can swim up to 50 yards in one breath). But prospective players without experience shouldn't fret. The pool is only about seven feet deep, and most players are only below water for 10 to 15 seconds.

"It's a lot easier than it looks," said club Vice President Monika Gonzalez. "You learn to hold your breath."

Spaans urged those who have never played before to give it a try, at least once. "It's a cool thing to say that you've done, and you're definitely going to have a lot of fun."

The UF club team travels to tournaments four to five times a year. They've been to Atlanta, Minneapolis, Washington D.C., and UNC Chapel Hill. The team just returned from a competition in Colorado, where they placed third out of 18 teams — a feat to be proud of considering that they didn't

have much time to get acclimated to the thinner air. Next, the team is headed to Key Largo at the end of Spring Break for a two-day potluck tournament. At this event, all participating teams will be broken up and scrambled into new combinations, giving the athletes a chance to play with brand new teammates. In the summer, the UF team hopes to attend the nationals in Las Vegas.

Beanbags and unicycles and pins, oh my! UF Objects in Motion teaches performance skills

There's so much going on at UF's Objects in Motion meetings that you don't know where to look first. Jugglers hurl pins at one another, throwing beanbags up from under their legs and catching them as they soar down from the sky. Streams of ribbons swirl through the air as part of a frantic warm-up routine. People zip around the chaos atop unicycles, wobbling to balance on just one wheel.

The club meets under the Reitz Union breezeway at the UF campus every Tuesday and Wednesday night. Members try new things and teach each other different

skills. They hold conversations while hopping in place or riding backwards on their unicycles. Jugglers take turns practicing with different objects. Sometimes they spend Fridays riding through the Plaza of the Americas. About every two weeks, members of the club meet up to ride out on the town together — usually they'll go out for frozen yogurt or some other form of dessert, a pack full of members bobbing along on one wheel each.

The members of the club come from a wide range of backgrounds and levels of experience. Peter Ramon, a 21-year-old junior majoring in chemical engineering, joined the club when he first came to UF. Two months prior to college, he bought a cheap unicycle and decided to try it out.

"It's better if you have people to teach you," Ramon said.

He picked up tips from the more experienced members, and over the course of the past three years he has learned enough to pass on his knowledge on to others.

One of the surprising things that he tells unicycling newcomers: "It should feel like you're falling forward."

This is because the unicyclist's center of gravity needs to be in front of the wheel. When a lot of beginners start out, they are afraid of this sensation, so they jerk back. But Ramon said that you want to feel like you're about to fall forward on your face.

If this concept isn't too terrifying, then you might just be ready to come to a session and try it for yourself. There are plenty of extra unicycles strewn across the ground at every meeting, and anyone is welcome to give it a shot.

The same goes for the juggling side of the club. Brittany Doyle, a 21-year-old UF senior studying political science, said her interest began when she saw members of Objects in Motion the first time she strolled through the Plaza of the Americas as a new transfer student. She walked up to the jugglers and asked to try.

Other members, such as UF chemical engineering freshman Morgan Eddy, have years of experience under their belts. Eddy knew that she wanted to be a part of the club since touring the campus in high school. She heard about a student unicycling organization and just had to be a part of it. Unicycling, after all, is in her blood.

Eleven years ago, on a whim Eddy's father bought a unicycle. The two learned how to ride together. In high school, she started a unicycle club. Eddy's love of unicycling was contagious, spreading to her boyfriend, Mitchell Joppru. When the couple first started



dating, Joppru had never sat on a unicycle before. Now, the couple is in the midst of training for a unicycle trip across the width of Florida — a journey that spans about 120 miles.

Objects in Motion has brought people together in more ways than one. The club is small and tightly knit — a family built around performance art. Several of the members graduated from UF a few years ago, but have stuck around Gainesville. PJ Arroyo, for instance, graduated in 2012 but has remained in town, teaching juggling on the side and attending meetings. However, prospective jugglers or unicyclists shouldn't be intimidated by the close bond the club members share, or their impressive level of skill. Objects in Motion is eager to expand.

"Don't look down!" The UF Slacklining Club welcomes new members to join in the fun

You may have seen this group in the Plaza of the Americas — arms stretched out, balancing precariously on a long piece of fabric slung between two trees. Shoes off and hands up, they take turns walking across the line. Sometimes other students crowd around them to watch in fascination. But for the members of UF Slacklining, this is just a regular club meeting.

Many confuse the club members with tightrope walkers, but their craft differs in a few ways. The slackline itself is a long, flat strip of nylon webbing that can be strung up pretty much anywhere. Depending on the level of skill and comfort, slackliners can adjust the tension of the line as well as the distance from the ground (the club sets theirs at about one- to two-feet high). These lines feel bouncier and looser than a tightrope, especially once you make it towards the center. There are two types — a user-friendly two-inch wide line, and a more challenging line that is about an inch wide. Both are wider than tightropes. Lines range in price from about \$50 to \$90, depending on the length.

That may seem like a lot to pay for something that looks like a long piece of ribbon, so many members of the club opt to share lines instead of purchasing their own. After all, the sport

revolves around community. If a line is up, anyone is welcome to come on up and try — even if they've never done it before.

Most beginners are afraid that they won't be able to stay on the line. When Andrea Sarcos, now a UF senior, began slacklining in the spring semester of her freshman year, staying on was her biggest concern.

"It's a really tough barrier to get through," Sarcos said. "I was really, really scared of falling when I first started."

It took more than a year of practice for Sarcos to gradually become comfortable with the line. First, she just wanted to see if she could maintain her balance standing on the line. Then she tried taking one step. Two steps. Three. Finally, she was making it all the way across the line and back.

"I finally got over being so afraid," Sarcos said. It was all about transcending her mental barrier and being patient enough to learn how to balance.

Now, Sarcos is the president of the UF slacklining club, an informal group that aims to meet two times a week, usually in the Plaza of the Americas. After breaking through her fear, Sarcos has gone on to slackline through Europe, sharing lines with people she has met during her travels in Berlin, Paris and Barcelona. Her number one tip that she always tells people? Don't look down.

Another member of the club, Julian Grudens, a 19-year-old, also

"I was really, really scared of falling when I first started."

— Andrea Sarcos



achieved slacklining success once he overcame a mental barrier. Grudens has only been slacklining since last summer, but he can now make it across the line in just 55 seconds. At a recent meeting, Grudens was the one who set things into motion, putting up his line first and testing the tension by sitting in the center and bouncing up and down. Once the line is set to his liking, Grudens rolled up his pants and pulled off his shoes. Eyes focused forward on a point somewhere in the tree bark ahead of him, he walked across the line.

His neighbor, Sydney Richardson, was in the plaza for lunch. She had seen him out there before, but had never tried it herself. Legs wobbling and hand gripping Grudens' tightly, she struggled to stay balanced on the line.

Other students flocked to the line to try. More experienced members were happy to help them up. Grudens explained to them that many beginners experience shaking legs because their body is trying to compensate for the imbalance. Their leg muscles don't know what to do.

Members traded tips and strategies for maintaining balance. It is the general consensus that slacklining barefoot works best. Some find it easier if they stare at a fixed point ahead of them. Lindsey Wilcox, a freshman who just joined the club last semester, can move forward on the line by not thinking about it. Wilcox still hasn't managed to make it all the way across, but she hasn't let that stop her from trying again. And again.

As students took turns trying to walk the line, groups walking through the plaza stopped to watch.

"A lot of people are really shy and I'll see them watching from afar," Sarcos said about the spectators. "I just want to grab them [and say], 'You can try this too! Don't be so scared.'"

For information about the club and future meetings, search "UF Slacklining Club" on Facebook. Or take a trip to the Plaza of the Americas — there's bound to be a line set up, and all you have to do is ask to try it for yourself.

Just remember: don't look down.

At the end of your rope: A high ropes course at Lake Wauburg helps groups bond

Of all of the ways to get to know your new co-workers, shooting across a zip line together probably isn't the first to come to mind. But it turns out that some of the best teambuilding in Gainesville takes place 35 feet above the ground.

At the High Ropes and Elements course at Lake Wauburg, groups of 12 or more sharpen their teamwork skills by working through physical obstacles together. The High Ropes component was added to the Outdoor Team Challenge Course in December 2013. Reservations are required, and being comfortable with heights is strongly recommended.

Before stepping foot on the course, groups first sit down with a Lake Wauburg employee to determine what kind of experience they are looking for. Since the staff at Lake Wauburg tries to tailor to their specific needs, each group's experience on the course will be a little different. Whether it's developing stronger

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communication skills or fostering a sense of teamwork, there are aspects of the course designed to enhance a variety of abilities.

Depending on the team dynamic, the course will bring out differing emotions and responses, said Michelle Langkop, coordinator for Parks and Outdoor Recreation at Lake Wauburg. Greater trust in your teammates is usually a natural by-product.

But before anyone can get to the high ropes, each group must first experience a separate low ropes course. Facilitators hand out helmets and harnesses. Then, participants must learn how to fall properly and perform a “self-rescue.” Participants are strapped into the course with two thick ropes and steel lobster claws at all times, but they still need to know how to pull themselves back onto the rope safely in the event that they lose their balance while several stories in the air.

After getting acclimated to the safety equipment, teams start out on the ground level and, with the guidance of a trained ropes course facilitator, slowly work their way up to the top of the towers. Langkop said the bottom portion of the course is a great opportunity to build confidence balancing on the ropes. The most intricate problem solving also takes place on the lowest level.

On a recent Saturday afternoon, two very different groups had reservations. First was a professional MBA program, whose 64 participants met only 24 hours before. Immediately following was the UF Involvement Team, a group on campus that helps students (especially freshmen and transfers) find clubs and activities that best suit their interests.

The groups slowly make their ascents, level by level. After they finish the bottom portion, they can gain altitude by climbing up an enormous rope web. This isn’t a race to finish, but rather a team bonding activity. On higher stories, participants

must cautiously scramble across a tight rope, with only wobbly dangling blocks of wood to grasp onto. It’s a difficult feat even for those who don’t mind being up so high in the air. When members of the group lag behind, the facilitators encourage the rest of the team to cheer them on, providing the encouragement needed to overcome the challenge.

The zip line is the grand finale. Some participants seem delighted at the prospect of flinging themselves from the top of the tower, but there’s also a fair amount of petrified members who clutch the ropes until their knuckles turn white. The scariest part comes at the beginning — mustering up the courage to lean forward far enough to fall from the platform face-first. There’s about 10 feet of free-fall where even the most daring let out a yelp. Then the slack in the line is caught, and gravity does the rest, sending the participants soaring down to the ground.

For UF students, Lake Wauburg admission is free, but groups not affiliated with UF can take on a weekday challenge course for a charge. The course is designed to develop group relationships and bonding, but reservations can be made for other purposes too, such as a family reunion or birthday party. Prices vary depending on the day of the week, number of members in the party, and whether or not participants are UF students. Visit the UF RecSports website for more information.

Whether it’s chasing a hockey puck underwater or whizzing through the air on a zip line, there’s an activity out there for everyone. Even though juggling, slacklining, underwater hockey, and ropes courses may not be the most popular or well-known activities, trying one (or all) is something you will never forget. **OT**