

ESSAY

FREQUENTLY ASKED UNICYCLING QUESTIONS

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#unicycling

As a unicyclist, I draw a certain amount of attention, and whether it be a busy sunny Saturday morning or 21:00 on a grim Monday night, people are inclined to ask me questions.

I imagine the spectacle and presumed friendliness of someone riding a unicycle contributes to people's willingness to enquire, and I've had some lovely chats with some lovely people spurred by unicycle-oriented lines of inquiry.

Unlike many 'frequently asked questions' lists, these are genuinely frequently asked questions. I'm borderline guaranteed to be asked at least one of them at least once per ride.

For better or for worse, one can usually only provide a quick response when zipping past, so here are the complete, unabridged answers to some FAQs.

DID YOU LOSE THE OTHER WHEEL?

People seem to say this and 'Where's the other half?' like some deranged compulsion or forced ritual. One would think that they'd gauge that it is the low-hanging fruit, but either they don't care, or they don't notice.

There are a few golden retorts and responses that most unicyclists have in their arsenal to hurl back in the moment, including:

- ◆ I don't need a training wheel.
 - ◇ If they're a tad rude, you can switch this to 'You still use a training wheel?' as a mild retort.
- ◆ It had a flat.
- ◆ Couldn't afford another.
- ◆ Oh no! Did I lose it again? (This is best said while frantically looking behind oneself.)
- ◆ It was a half-off sale.
- ◆ I'm paying for it in instalments.
- ◆ Don't stress. It'll be along in a bit.
- ◆ It fell off a ways back.
- ◆ The extra weight was slowing me down.

CAN YOU DO A WHEELIE?

What do you think I'm doing? What more do you want from me? *Arghhhhh!*

IS IT DIFFICULT?

'Difficult' isn't quantifiable, so I'll lean on comparison. It is harder than riding a bike. With a bike, you can fall left or right. The two-wheeled design means that you are stable forwards and backwards.

On a unicycle, there is no forwards/backwards stabilisation. You can fall any which way, though you tend to go in the cardinal directions.

Once you've learnt how to ride, it is similar to a bike, albeit with a slightly higher difficulty baseline. You don't really need to think about how to ride a bike once you can; it just comes naturally. The same applies to riding a unicycle.

...to the mechanics of a unicycle and the mass involved, you don't usually end up moving at very significant speeds, so no fall is too catastrophic.

You are not mounted to a unicycle, so you can generally just step off the front or back. If the unicycle has handlebars, then that can hinder a front dismount, but in most cases when you're forced to bail or ejected from the unicycle, you can simply walk off it without sustaining any damage yourself. You're already standing up fairly straight when riding, and your feet are already doing the correct walking motion when you're pedalling.

Some danger is present when riding with large wheels, such as those at 36", where you can build significant momentum, and stopping or redirection of momentum can become more difficult. The bigger the wheel, the higher you're positioned as a rider, which also makes an unplanned dismount more dangerous.

Even though not legally mandated where I live, I *always* wear a helmet, as you should when riding any wheeled recreational device such as a unicycle, bicycle, or scooter. The minor inconvenience is more than offset by minimising the risk of one's head becoming the tip of a meat crayon.

Even if you do everything right, it only takes one fool behind the wheel of a car or other vehicle to change circumstances dramatically.

HOW LONG DID IT TAKE TO LEARN?

It is difficult for me to say. I was spotty in my initial learning. For a period I was very studious and dedicated regular time each day for a couple of weeks, then I took a break, and then I returned in a slightly spotty fashion until I gained the ability to ride a fair distance reasonably. From there I rode more and more, which continued to refine my ability.

It isn't something one is likely to pick up in an afternoon, but it isn't too difficult if you keep chipping away at it. I've got a full and comprehensive guide with interactive sections in the works to help teach the ins and outs.

...the time I learnt to ride, I was also taking regular figure skating

say, they are able to use conveniently mount a matter of inches.

DOES IT HAVE BRAKES?

Sometimes asked as ‘How do you stop?’, it is a good question. Some unicycles, especially high-end ones, do have a brake, but it isn’t equivalent to a bike brake. They take the same forms, such as disc brakes or rim breaks, but are very different in usage.

Due to having no inherent stability forwards and back, the brakes are likely to eject you forwards as the momentum of your body carries forward and the wheel comes to a stop.

Therefore, one must be very reserved or skilled with their employment of the brakes and feather them carefully. Most of the time, stopping on a unicycle is achieved by pedalling a tad slower, which is effective due to the fixed-wheel nature.

One must still be careful and ease their slowing down via pedal power, though, as they remain liable to be flung forwards or have their full momentum jarringly transferred into their knees if they’re too abrupt. The latter really isn’t fun.

DOES THAT HURT?

In general riding, the only pain one is likely to experience is around the crotch. While riding, only the necessary weight to make the pedals move is distributed to the pedals, with the rest directly down on the saddle for the purpose of stability.

Unicycle saddles are designed with this in mind, but even so, the perineum is a very sensitive area, and some saddle soreness is to be expected. One can experiment with padded cycling pants or other methods of aversion, but there will always be a slight bit of discomfort. One’s best bet is to alter their seating and posture to subtly redistribute their weight on different points throughout their ride.

Irritation slowly increases throughout the duration of a ride and is exacerbated by additional loads such as carried items or backpacks. For this reason, you’ll see unicycle tourers such as [Ed Pratt](#) [↗] mount cargo to the frame, rather than on their person.

riding. If you're off-road riding on coarse ground, you might also scrape the skin off your palms or arms in the case of an unplanned dismount. Gloves can be a good idea in such situations.

DO YOU HAVE HANDLEBARS?

More advanced unicycles can have handlebars, but they're a bit different in function to your typical bicycle handlebars. There are three main purposes of unicycle handlebars. You can use them somewhat to influence steering, but they are certainly not a high-precision device and are mainly useful for distributing your weight into a turn.

The greatest benefit of handlebars is addressing the aforementioned saddle discomfort. By placing some of your weight onto the handlebars, you can distribute it more evenly. However, it is a case of distributing weight carefully so that you don't fall forward.

The next benefit is for pulling the unicycle into your body when doing tricky or technical riding. Riding on gravel or doing hops or whatnot is prone to throwing you from the unicycle, so by pulling yourself into the saddle you stay far more stable.

The last main purpose is mounting things. On my handlebars I have some grips mounted, as well as a bell and brake. I've seen people mount trip computers and such as well.

Handlebars really vary in usage and form depending on the purpose of the unicycle and what the rider wishes to use it for. Larger, more distance-oriented unicycles are often fitted with longer, steeper handlebars, while off-road unicycles are often fitted with stubbier handlebars that stay out of the way.

HOW DO YOU GET ON IT?

The most obvious way is to start with one pedal at the bottom of the rotation and use a pole, tree, stick, or other stable object to steady oneself while clambering up onto it.

The more complex way is by doing a so-called 'free mount'. There are a few variations of free mounting, but the most common and easy is to 'e the pedals almost parallel to the ground and then to come up

DOES IT HAVE SUSPENSION?

Nope. One's knees are one's suspension. You might get the slightest bit of shock absorption from your tyre and saddle, but that is the extent of it. On unicycles designed for off-road situations (often dubbed municycles, short for mountain unicycle), thicker tyres are often present partly for this purpose.

Typical suspension proves more of a pain than a gain. To implement it in the forks means that it saps energy as one rides and allows the wheel to move upward relative to the body when hitting a bump, which is not ideal. That isn't to mention the inherent disconnect between rider, wheel, and ground, causing difficulty balancing and inhibiting the ability to make micro adjustments. There is also a lot of force involved when unicycling, so any suspension would have to be extremely well engineered.

A few experimental folks have tried, but the consensus at large is that suspension on a unicycle does more harm than good.

DO YOU EVER FALL OFF?

Not with much frequency. Once every several rides I might have a slightly less intentional or less graceful dismount, but not frequently. Most rides I don't dismount at all, with the primary reason for me having to dismount being crossing a large road.

I fall off occasionally when doing something tricky or technical off-road, but that is expected from pushing the limits of one's ability.

DOES IT HAVE GEARS?

None of my unicycles have gears, and I have not ridden a geared unicycle, but geared unicycles do exist. People have made geared hubs, most famously the [Schlumpf hub](#) ↗, which is expensive but available for general purchase.

Geared unicycles with the Schlumpf hub have two ratios – one typical and one 17:11 – and are toggled by pressing a button on the axle with one's foot on the downstroke when pedalling.

down and place one's weight slightly further back but is absolutely manageable safely. You can't coast down due to the rotation of the cranks being fixed to the rotation of the wheel, so there isn't quite the same joy.

Going up hills is tough but quite fun. Steep inclines can be managed quite readily, but you can't change gears as you might on a bicycle. If an incline is excessively steep, momentum is shaky during the climb as one comes to a near complete stop at the conclusion of each downstroke due to the fixed wheel design. Slope dependent, you can sometimes outperform bike riders when riding uphill.

These are the questions I've heard most frequently, but I'm more than happy to take any unicycle-related queries you might have. Just [send them over](#).

FOOTNOTES

1. There do exist free wheel unicycles, but they're an eccentric novelty – even more so than standard unicycles. [↩](#)

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