

## UNICYCLING 101: GETTING STARTED

For many people, learning to unicycle gives a huge sense of accomplishment because it feels impossible at first, but with persistence becomes completely doable. Young or old, anyone can learn and it's easier than most people think. If you're new to the sport, here are a few tips to get started:

### FIRST STEPS

Find a good place to practice – ideally a smooth, level surface alongside a fence to hang onto, or a wall with a railing, with nothing nearby that would hurt if you fell on it. Avoid grass, gravel, carpets, or other uneven surfaces — you'll have plenty of time for that once you're riding off-road.

Stand so that your support is to one side. Put the unicycle between your legs and hold the front of the saddle with one hand. Decide which is your dominant foot, the foot you want to put on a pedal first. Often this corresponds to whether you are left or right handed, but not always.

Orient the pedals so that the pedal you will step onto is in the rear, slightly lower than horizontal. Put your dominant foot onto the pedal so that the pedal is centered just in front of the arch of your foot. Now grasp your support with one or both hands, and rock up onto the unicycle, sitting up straight with about 80% of your weight on the saddle. It will feel very unstable at first!

Rock back and forth, and get a feel for how your balance changes with different crank positions. You will have the most control when your cranks are horizontal and the least control when your cranks are vertical. Check your saddle height — you'll want your legs just slightly bent at the bottom of the crank rotation — and make sure your tire is pumped up hard enough to avoid undue resistance when you turn.

Look at the ground a short distance ahead, lean slightly forward, and start pedaling. Maintain enough speed to propel yourself through the ver-



tical crank position. Hold onto the support as little as possible, letting go for short periods as you get more comfortable.

When you're ready try riding away from the support. Look where you are going, not at your feet. Hold your arms outstretched, with good muscle tone but not tense. Don't try to catch the unicycle when you fall unless you're sure you can do it safely.

Do this over and over until you are confident riding in a straight line. Above all, be patient! This step can take 10-20 hours of practice, or longer for some riders. For many, the initial steps of learning to ride are the hardest part to break through, but before long you will be wondering why it felt so difficult in the beginning.

### TURNING

Turning on a unicycle involves shifts of weight and body position that cause you to change direction. Turn your shoulders in the direction you want to go and keep your arms out with good muscle tone. In the beginning you may find you need to flap your arms to turn, but eventually you'll find that subtle body movements work just as well, such as looking or turning your hips in the direction you want to go.



### FREEMOUNTING

Freemounting involves mounting a unicycle and starting to pedal without using any kind of support. It's best to learn this after you can ride at least somewhat comfortably from a point of support.

Position yourself the same way as you have already been doing when mounting with support. Rock up by shifting your body weight forward and quickly place your other foot on the pedal, immediately riding forwards. Balancing your sitting pressure with how hard you step down on your mounting foot will help keep the unicycle stable underneath you. If you feel too unstable to pedal, try mounting while holding on to your support and use it as little as possible until you can do away with it altogether.

### CLIMBING AND DESCENDING HILLS

Find a gentle hill and pedal towards it. As you start climbing you'll find you must pedal harder through the horizontal crank position to avoid stalling out when your cranks are vertical. If it gets steeper, grab the front handle and pull up gently to counteract the pedaling force, holding your other hand out for balance. Experiment with pedaling while



standing up, which you will need for extra power on steeper climbs.

On descents, brake with your foot as your rear crank rises into the horizontal position. Practice braking with both hands outstretched and when holding the front handle. On steeper descents, keep your upper body slightly forwards, and your lower body slightly back. This body position helps you to recover quickly if you lose balance.

Once you have mastered the basics of riding forward, turning, and negotiating gentle hills, you have the skills to start riding off-road. For a more comprehensive introduction and descriptions of many other tricks you can do, check some of the resources listed at the end of this book.

LEFT An ideal learning space has a stable fence beside smooth, flat ground. SEAN WHITE

CENTER Kim Lind crests a bump near Rapid City, South Dakota. BILL GILBERTSON

RIGHT Turn your shoulders in the direction you want to go and keep your arms out with good muscle tone. SEAN WHITE