

News

**MOUNTAIN DAREDEVILS:** (Right) Unicyclists take the trail at Kent Ridge park while (far right) student Sheikh Abdul Muzzammil Sheikh Abdul Feisal tackle the slopes at Bukit Timah mountain bike trail.

TNP PICTURES: JONATHAN CHOO



# When there's a wheel, there's a way

*Unicyclists brave rocks, mud and scary slopes to blaze nature trails*

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**M**ENTION unicycles and images of clowns and circus troupes come to mind.

But here's a group who rides the unicycle off-road and roughs it out on rocks and mud.

Unknown to most outside their circle, the group of three to 10 unicyclists here head to places like the Bukit Timah Nature Reserve, Pulau Ubin, Kent Ridge Park and park connectors on weekends every month.

In case you're wondering, the sport of mountain unicycling or muni isn't just for daredevils – it attracts people from all walks of life.

They include primary schoolers, polytechnic students and professionals. The youngest is about 12 and one of the oldest, Mr Melvin Heng, is 52.

Mr Heng, a production supervisor, picked up the sport when his two nephews and younger sister introduced him to it in July 2006. He has been hooked since.

In fact, Mr Heng made his first off-road unicycling trip, with his nephews and sister, on a mountain range in Hong Kong just two months after picking up the sport.

Getting started will set you back by about \$300. That includes the cost of the muni, helmet and a pair of shin guards.

Other than those requirements, mastering a muni may be easier than handling a bicycle. After about two weeks on a standard unicycle, you are ready to muni.

"The steep slopes can be quite tiring and challenging, but when it's too steep, we walk down the slope and get onto the bike again when it's better," Mr Heng said.

For 21-year-old Sheikh Abdul Muzzammil Sheikh Abdul Feisal, doing muni is safer than mountain biking.

"On one wheel, you can hop over things like tree roots. Along the way, you can also hold on to trees for support," said the polytechnic student.

Ms Cai Jiahui, 26, a recreation manager, agrees. She also sells munis via an online shop that she runs with friends.

## Just jump off

"On a bike, if you slip or trip, you'd get trapped by the handlebar. On a unicycle, you'd just jump off or step off and land on your feet," she said.

"Also, there's never the chance you'd be going at a speed you're not in control of because you can't go as fast as on a bicycle," she added.

Said engineer Chua Kai Lun, 28: "When we go uphill, it takes more effort than on a bicycle, because of the slow speed and there are no gear changes."

Given their past outings, the group knows where the easy and tough terrains are.

Mr Sheikh said: "For the advanced tracks, there are roots, uneven surfaces, holes in mud and rocks."

"But the beginner tracks, which we also use for warm-ups, have fewer slopes, grass, man-made planks. There usually aren't any holes or rocks."

The difference between unicycles for muni and regular unicycles lies in the wheels.

Ms Cai said that muni tyres are similar to those for mountain bicycles – they are wider, knobbly and are of lower pressure.

The hub, which holds the wheel together, must be strong so it doesn't give way when going on bumps.

Each session on the advanced track takes the muni group some three hours to complete.

As with all sports, injuries are not uncommon.

Ms Cai said: "I've had a few scrapes and bruises from skidding on slippery surfaces in the rain or trying out some new trick."

Shin guards and a helmet are a must for Mr Heng, "especially at this age" but he's suffered only "muscle strains and minor falls" to date.

Mr Sheikh, a wheels enthusiast, said: "Unicycling gives me the satisfaction of conquering. You train to have good momentum, balancing, flexibility and to shift your body weight around."

Mr Heng recommends that "people my age" take up unicycling.

He said: "It's quite cool to mix with the younger generation too. I treat it as my weekly exercise when I cycle at the park connector near my home."

In fact, so seasoned is he that he can walk his dog while unicycling.

Apart from curious stares, the group has enjoyed some high points. One was a trip to Pulau Ubin a few years ago.

Mr Heng recalled: "The usual price for entry per bicycle was \$2, but the ticketing people charged us \$1 each."



## Riding in silence in the rain

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IT WAS a chilling statement.

"Before the end of this year, another dozen cyclists will die on the roads."

Mr Benoit Valin, 32, at Merlion Park, organiser of this year's Ride of Silence, made that grim reminder.

I was at the Merlion Park waterfront yesterday morning, joined by 450 other cyclists on their flashy steeds.

Mountain bikes, road bikes, foldable bikes and even a handful of unicyclists.

Riders cycled in silence from the Merlion Park to three different locations – Bishan Park, Joo Chiat Community Centre and Cashew-Senja Community Centre.

Our aim: To promote road sharing and awareness of cycling safety.

The recent deaths of cyclists Mr Benjamin Mok and Ms Evelyn Toh has spurred the community to champi-

on the cause of safe cycling in Singapore.

A cause, I feel, is worthy of support.

Participants were also dressed in white and each had a luminous red armband.

"It's a sign of mourning and solidarity," says Mr Valin, a Canadian scientist.

This is the second time Mr Valin is organising the event, which was attended by Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports, Dr Vivian Balakrishnan.

Dr Balakrishnan, who knew Mr Mok personally, said: "When Ben Mok died, it really brought home the pain. One cyclist dead is one too many."

A minute of silence was held. The overcast sky, pregnant with the promise of rain, did little to alleviate the sombre mood.

I rode along the West route, which would stop by Mr Mok's "ghost bike" and end at the Cashew-Senja Community Centre, where there was a carnival on safe cycling.

The "ghost bike" was a white-painted bicycle placed at the scene of Mr Mok's fatal accident.

It was put up by the community two months ago, as a memorial to the former cycling enthusiast.

Then the rain came down; it poured, and threatened to put an end to the event.

But riders soldiered on, determined to make a statement about safe cycling.

I asked fellow riders if they had heard or knew of cyclists who had been involved in accidents.

All responded with a solemn nod or a grave "yes".

For me and, I suspect, for many other riders, the recent deaths of both Mr Mok and Ms Toh weighed heavily on our minds.

One rider, security guard Mr Maszelan, 36, who was participating for the second time, said: "It's important that they're remembered, or they would've died in vain."

At the "ghost bike", Mr Mok's father, Mr Mok Cher Yong, was on hand to greet and thank riders.

As the elder Mr Mok went around shaking hands, there was nary a dry eye.

Mr Steven Lim, president of the Safe Cycling Task Force, told me at the end of the ride: "Cyclists need to realise that they have the most to lose in any accident."

"Don't assume you're safe even if you have the right of way. Ride defensively."



TNP PICTURES: LUKE YAN



**SADNESS:** Mr Benoit Valin (in reflective vest) and Dr Vivian Balakrishnan (in white) stop at the 'ghost bike' to pay their respects to the late Mr Benjamin Mok. (Inset) Reporter Danson Cheong cycles in the rain.