

MUni?

Klaas Bil



Despite the country's two-dimensional reputation, it does have its highs if you just know where to look. Zuid-Limburg, the southernmost part of the country and geographically part of the Ardennes range, reaches to 321 m (1,050 feet) high. This is the home of the annual Unicycling in the Dutch Mountains event. Other hill ranges include Veluwe, Twente and Utrechtse Heuvelrug.

Unicycling in Buytenpark

The western part of the country is mainly reclaimed land from the sea or from inland lakes and generally as flat as a pancake. The Buytenpark, where this MUni event took place, is one of the artificially landscaped hilly bits, with peaks towering up to 25 metres over the surrounding polders. Now don't laugh!

Just west of Zoetermeer in what is otherwise the flattest part of the country, rubbish lies piled up tens of metres high, across an area of several square kilometres. Dirty folks, those Zoetermeerders? Mwah, not really. With a top soil of a few metres, the Buytenpark has become an attractive nature area in a rough kind of way, on Sunday afternoons a favourite domain of walkers, joggers, mountain bikers and the occasional sporty dog owner. But never before had it seen so many unicyclists at the same time!

These lovers of mountain unicycling were mainly from the region, but also from faraway places like Dordrecht, Cuijk, Enschede, and even a fanatic from Wales (to be honest, Stuart hadn't come over exclusively for this event). It was quite a mixed group with ages ranging from about 12 to 53, and about one third of the female variety. Everyone could cope well with the course that Klaas Bil and Walter de Valk had plotted. Some flat pieces, with even the occasional stretch of asphalt thrown in, alternated with steep climbs and stiff descents. Although the weather was calm and dry, the trails were generously muddy in places from the rain of earlier that week.

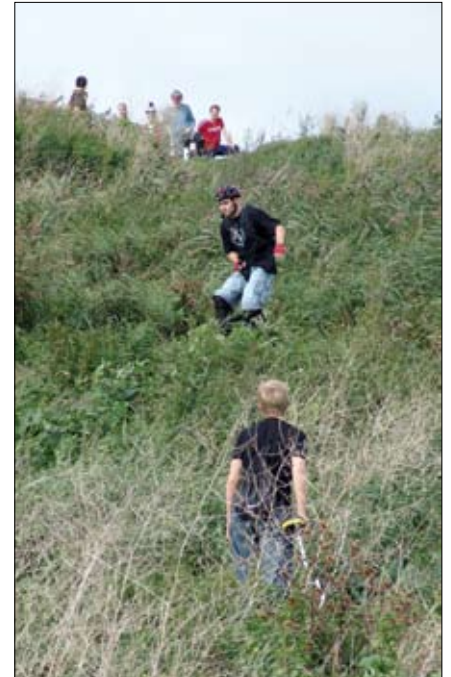
In the Netherlands?



To the disappointment of some, this meet had been announced as a 'rolling MUni' event, with few jumps, drops or spots for trialling. But some participants discerned far more objects to play on than Klaas and Walter had ever thought...

After a few hours of riding and playing (10.9 km according to Klaas' GPS that he nerdily carried on his helmet all the time), the group returned to their starting point. Meanwhile, the canteen of the BMX club had opened specifically for this MUni meet so everyone could score a drink and a snack, and have a pee. The next hour was mainly for relaxing—juggle some, chat some, or have a go around the 250 metre oval tarmac track on the 29" Schlumpf geared unicycle that one of the participants had brought.

Of course we had arranged that the entire BMX track was exclusively ours, which was quite cool. To be able to ride up the humps you had to pick up a fair bit of speed, which is not exactly easy on a unicycle, as we know quite well. Some practice worked wonders though. The last half hour



was devoted to a little competition on the inner BMX track. Some qualifying rounds in threes and fours against the clock were followed by a final of the fastest four. Paul van der Maat (15) won and was awarded the coveted title of 'Unicycling World Champion BMX Track Zoetermeer 2006'.

Unicycling in the Dutch Mountains

UITDM is the main focus of Dutch MUni, organised each year in the last weekend of June. The event started in 1997 under the name Mountain Unicycling Zuid-Limburg as a local outing for members of Jongleercollectief, a juggling club in the south of the Netherlands. At the start it attracted some 10 to 20 people, who until then had only ridden their unicycles in the gym. Over the years the event has grown, both time-wise (now Friday til Sunday) as well as in attendance (last year's edition drew about 80 people, including international participants). Of course the technical level has gone up too!

The event has several strong points: a playful, haphazard atmosphere, well-organised technical riding in the most hilly part of the Netherlands, a trials course, fire show (the Jongleercollectief specialty), some off-side juggling and acrobatics—not forgetting the traditional barbecue on Saturday night, which even caters for vegetarians.

The organisers always try to come up with something special. Recent highlights include a night flaming torch ride and the exclusive use of an indoor skiing centre and skatehall. Thanks in part to low-cost accommodation (bring your own tent), the entry fee is very reasonable including all meals and drinks—even beer and wine.

The 2007 event will take place from 29 June to 1 July. For more information see www.jongleercollectief.nl.

Opposite: Klaas Bil waving down the trail, and the group a dizzy 20 metres (65 feet) above the surrounding polders. Above left to right: There is a trail here somewhere. Lindy Schutte on the BMX track. Photos: Jan Molenaar. Paul van der Maat making good use of some dead wood. Photo: Martin van der Veen. Right: An extremely unfair race on the BMX track between René van Schijndel, John van Baar and Paul van Oosten. Photo: Jan Molenaar

Unicycling in the Netherlands

Almost every self-respecting city in the country has a youth circus, where youngsters learn to unicycle as one of the circus disciplines, and some elementary schools offer unicycling lessons. In addition, many juggling clubs offer unicycling, and a few dedicated unicycling clubs exist as well. All in all, that's quite some riders speckled across the country. However, the number of unicyclists who take their riding as a serious sport is probably less than a hundred (in a population of 16 million). There is no central unicycling organisation in the Netherlands and apart from the occasional national or regional event, many Dutch unicyclists are rather disconnected from each other (which they don't seem to mind).

The main styles practiced in the Netherlands, in order of number of riders involved, are freestyle, trials, MUni and distance riding. The country's most famous riders are probably Leo Vandewoestijne (who makes a living performing on a unicycle), and Dustin Schaap, a young rider who has held the one hour distance world record on a unicycle. Incidentally, Sem Abrahams is half Dutch. Uni

