

Look, ma, no hands! A unicycle is hard to ride at any time, but Wally Watts is riding his round the world. For fun!

WOBBLING WALLY WATTS

Text and photographs by Robert C. Morgan

The scene is a small, winding street in Agra, India, a steady, slow-motion collage of people, animals and vehicles, the sound an endless cacaphonic din. Suddenly, there is excitement and shouting. Heads turn, eyebrows are raised. Arms waving, legs pumping, head and shoulders above the curious crowds, a man comes barrelling down the street. The Lone Ranger on Tonto? No ... it's 'Wobbling' Wally Watts on his unicycle! And what is this twenty-nine-year-old Canadian doing with his unicycle in Agra? Why, he's riding it around the world!

Wallace Watts of Edmonton, Canada, may be news to Agra, but he is no stranger to public recognition. Any recent visitor to New York's Empire State Building would have had an opportunity to see an exhibition on Wally among a display dealing with holders of current Guinness World Records. In 1973, by undertaking a gruelling journey of seven thousand three hundred and sixty-six kilometres across Canada from Vancouver to Halifax, Wally clearly established a new distance record for the unicycle (though, to Wally's frustration, Guinness have contradicted their Empire State exhibition and, in their current edition, list Walter Nisson as the holder of the current unicycle distance record — a record established in 1934, but re-set twice since then). Wally's trans-Canada trip took ninety-three days, and tolerating bitter cold in eastern Canada and in the Rocky Mountains he averaged seventy-nine kilometres per day.

Partly through Wally's efforts the unicycle, long viewed simply as a one-wheeled maverick cousin of the bicycle, has enjoyed a recent kindling of public interest. The unicycle, generally associated with eccentricity, juggling, circuses, tight-ropes and clowns, clearly presents a more physically demanding experience for the rider than a bicycle, and has

inspired an international non-profit unicycle club and an international quarterly magazine.

'Wobbling' was added as a prefix to Wally's name on his trans-Canada trip by an Edmonton newspaper reporter; unicyclists seem to enjoy such names. Prior to setting the current record, Wally travelled to Las Vegas, Nevada, to exchange greetings and tips with the previous record holder. 'His name is Steve "Unique" McPeek,' Wally told me. 'He cycled from Chicago to Las Vegas in six weeks back in 1968. But, you see, "Unique" had backing from Circus Circus' Casino — a large promotion company — which included five hundred dollars a week plus expenses and a back-up truck following him. I have no financial backing, and never have had, though the mayor of Edmonton gave me a letter of introduction for me to present to the mayors of some of the cities I pass through. For "Unique", cycling is an occupation. For me, it's a sport.'

While Wally doesn't cycle with a formal entourage, he is certainly never at a loss for company. It has always been common for travellers to experience the close scrutiny of the locals in a new country. When the native residents of what is now called Mexico first laid eyes on a Spanish explorer dismounting from his horse — an animal they had never seen before — they were mystified by the phenomenon of a two-headed, six-legged, two-armed being that could separate itself, and they stared in awe as one half walked about and the other half remained stationary. Wally has been similarly viewed. Whether the accosting of a stranger is done out of a commercial motive or simple curiosity, travellers often find themselves the centre of attention. It's not always to the liking of one who enjoys privacy.

'You can quadruple that crowd-gathering business for me,' he says wearily. 'I create a crowd wherever I go. People sometimes want me to ride the wheel just after they've watched me ride the last half kilometre right up to where they're standing. Often, when I come to a town and need some rest or food, I just stay out of sight. Then there are the guys who want to try to ride the wheel themselves. They really look funny, dressed in their business suits, weaving round on the seat with their friends holding them up.'

If the average local citizen is slightly mystified by this wheeled wonder, the various law enforcement agents whom Wally wobbles by appear to be in a similar quandary. Laws for unicycles don't seem to exist in the vehicle codes of most countries, and when he waves and strokes his way past a policeman or policewoman the ensuing encounter is occasionally punitive, often hilarious and usually totally confusing. After starting his world tour in 1976 with a flight from New York to Prestwick, Scotland, Wally was cruising leisurely down the highway to Glasgow when he was pulled over by a Scottish policeman who looked him up and down and decided, 'Ye must be doing *something* illegal, laddie!'

In the months to come, Wally and 'the wheel' (as he refers to his cycle) would play roadside hosts to many constables, *gendarmes* and *carabinieri*. Between Edinburgh and London he was temporarily charged with having no brakes and no

tread on his tyres — but a unicyclist stops his machine by reversing the normal leg action, and the type of tyre used on a unicycle doesn't require tread for safe riding. In France, Wally was erroneously informed by a policeman that unicycling in France was strictly prohibited. The official, with crisp decorum, then proceeded to radio in to the police station, only forty metres from where he and Wally stood, for a passport check. Wally was picked up minutes later — not by the *gendarmes*, but by a French motorist who'd watched the bizarre encounter, and who invited Wally into his home for two weeks. Two Italian motorcycle policemen once confronted Wally on the road and ended up giving him an escort with sirens, and several cold beers while stalling him until a reporter friend and a photographer arrived for an interview.

'The hospitable people make me forget the grabbing, loud crowds. All those who showed me kindness, who invited me to stay with them, they really smoothed out the trip,' he says. 'I'll never forget any of them.' He will also never forget the policeman who followed him some distance and finally told him, 'Waving your arms like that as you ride along might give a driver a heart attack ...'

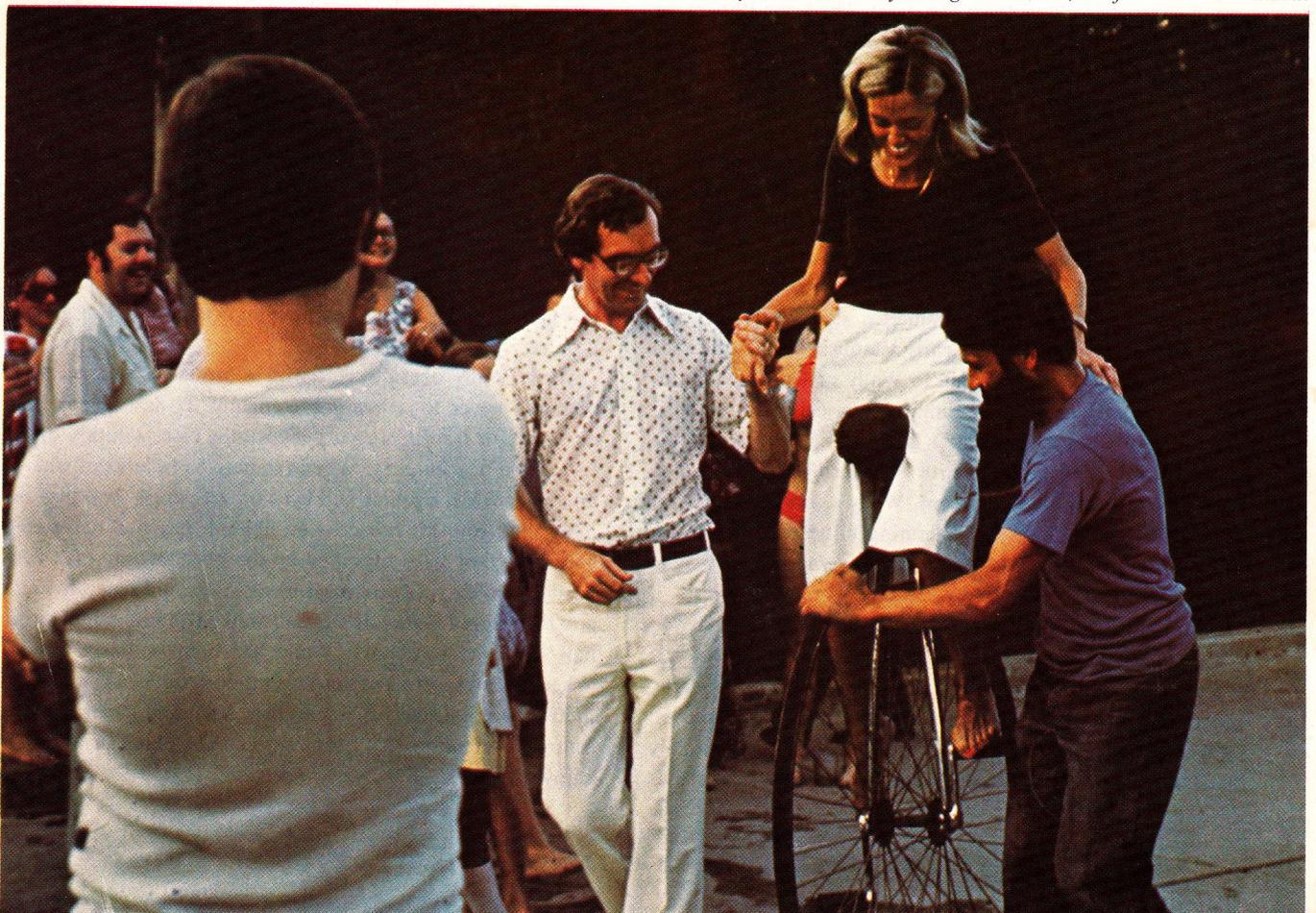
Coronary arrests are more likely to happen to the rider of a unicycle than to the driver of an automobile or the rider of a bicycle. The unicycle (unless it is equipped with a drive chain — Wally's is

not) offers the operator the spartan proposition of half a revolution of the wheel for every stroke on the pedal, as opposed to nearly a full revolution per stroke on a bicycle. Multi-gear bicycles allow the rider to 'level out' a hill by changing the bicycle's gear ratio, thus making pedalling relatively easy. Both unicycles and bicycles have enjoyed a recent upsurge of interest in the West, a result of the new attention and importance placed on sport-oriented recreation. Wally, who exudes an explosive vitality and robustness, is a mobile advertisement for good, healthy, very fast walking — try matching him stride for stride some time when he decides to walk across town to pick up new spokes for his 'wheel'!

Originally employed as a mechanic and car inspector for the Canadian National Railway, Wally requested leave of absence in order to make his trans-Canadian journey; his request was turned down. 'When I told them I'd resign,' he explains, 'they gave me a combined vacation and leave of absence. I was *ready* to resign, though. As far as I'm concerned,' he continues (more realistically than egotistically), 'nobody is going to stop me from doing what I want to do in this life.'

Wally is stopped occasionally, however, by various media representatives, and these encounters are not without their humorous moments. Two days before reaching Quebec, he read a front-page story (com-

Everyone wants to try riding 'the wheel', but few succeed unaided.



plete with photographs) describing his triumphant entry into the city that morning! Numerous other newspaper interviews, and appearances on radio and television shows (including the popular *Blue Peter* show in London), are included in his media exposure, though he does not actively seek publicity.

'I don't go around approaching them, selling myself. I figure if they feel I'm worth covering, fair enough,' he says flatly. 'On television shows, I can serve as the "gimmick-of-the-week". A couple of days after I cycled from Calais to Paris, I did an English-language educational television programme, "Français-Anglais". I'd built a cycle for a French boy, and he and I cycled past two people sitting on a park bench, and a few million French people learned how to say "Did you see that?" in English. Then we disappeared under the Arc de Triomphe. I don't speak any language other than English fluently, but I've learned to say "around the world", "I'm tired", and "later" in many languages.'

At least once, communication problems have altered Wally's travel plans. Just outside of Rome, the spokes on the unicycle weakened, and the wheel collapsed. A friendly Australian traveller drove him and the wounded wheel into Rome, where Wally left instructions for the unicycle to be shipped to London, the only city in which he had been able to find suitable spare parts. After going back to England by train, he waited a week for the wheel to arrive before hurrying back to Rome to discover that his instructions had been misunderstood and the wheel stored instead of shipped.

Eventually the cycle was completely rebuilt, and Wally travelled back to Rome by rail, cycled to Brindisi, and took a ferry to Greece. There, appropriately enough, he pulled his Achilles tendon while cycling to Athens. During his ensuing convalescence in the Greek capital, winter rolled out its carpet of snow and ice across the roads of northern Greece, the next stage on his itinerary. He shifted gears, flew back to Alberta for six months' work on the Canadian oil fields while the Greek winter passed, and flew back to Athens in the spring. The trip to Istanbul went smoothly enough, but rough roads lay ahead.

'After resting in Istanbul, I headed for Ankara. That ride was the most hair-raising part of this whole journey. There are about four hundred and fifty kilometres between the two cities, and each year at least one person is killed on that road for every kilometre. Driving in that stretch is done with a horn and an accelerator, believe me. Anyway, just outside of Ankara a big truck

pulled up behind me and gave me a big blast with those ear-splitting double air horns they've got, and forced me off the road. My foot slipped off, got jammed between spokes and forks, the wheel stopped dead, and I went right over the top. I broke my left arm and sprained my foot. Luckily, a nice guy in a jeep sort of gathered me and the wheel together. Eventually I got to the Canadian Embassy, and then to hospital.'

For most people, a painful experience generates a certain amount of contemplation, and Wally is no exception. Down, but not out, his arm in a sling, he reflected on his unique journey and weighed the immediate possibilities of continuing. Though not accustomed to having his zealous and directed exuberance equalled, let alone eclipsed, by any conditions — man-made or natural — he had to be realistic about his health and the demands of the terrain that lay ahead: eastern Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan. Any or all of those countries offered to a cyclist the grim combination of merciless heat and cold, steep, non-negotiable grades, and areas of sparse population where stops for rest and nutrition would be luxuries (if available at all). Pondering the future, his mental travels brought him back to the memory of an obstacle that had taken him to the absolute ceiling of his strength and willpower.

'It was a stretch of road just before Istanbul,' he recalls, 'a steep grade that gradually got steeper as it approached the top. I was riding next to a truck that kept having to down-shift just to keep moving. About halfway up I had to pedal and push with everything I had — plus something extra. When the truck and I hit the top together, I could not have made it another foot. I just broke down and cried.' Wally realised that he, too, had his limits. With a back-up truck, he might be able to take on the land that lay ahead, but he would be foolish to attempt the trip without help. Chastened, but still undaunted, he travelled by rail and bus from Ankara to Amritsar, India, stored his wheel at the Sikh Golden Temple, and convalesced in Srinigar, Kashmir.

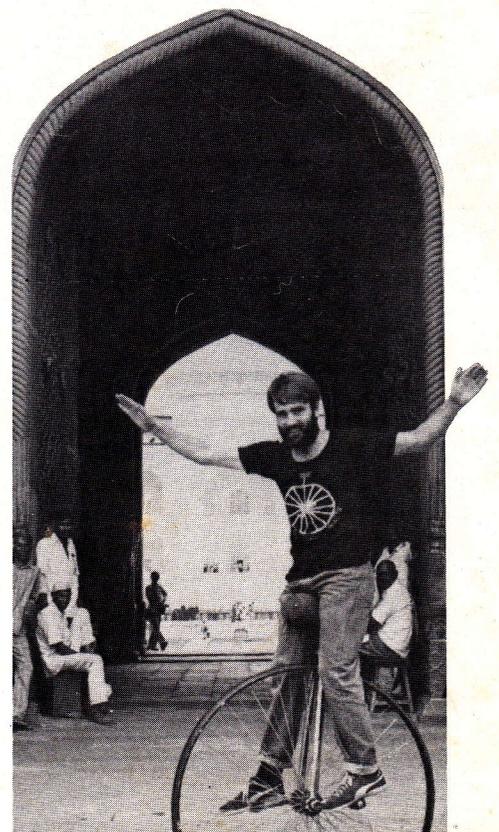
After letting the break in his arm mend, and the August monsoon season pass, he returned to Amritsar and journeyed on to New Delhi. When I last spoke to him, his plans were to continue across India to Calcutta, fly to Bangkok, and cycle to Singapore. A week's boat ride to Darwin, Australia, would be followed by a stretch of two thousand four hundred kilometres across the Australian outback to Townsville and a long journey down to Melbourne. From Melbourne he hopes to go by boat to

Invercargill, New Zealand, cycle to Auckland, boat to Los Angeles, and complete his world cycling circumnavigation with a trans-USA spin to New York City.

'Some people think a world cycle journey would be totally beyond them, but I just take it a stretch at a time,' he says. 'I first learned to cycle after I saw the "Monkees" on television riding cycles. I found out later they were really riding tricycles with two barely visible little wheels at the back of the main wheel. I got excited, and tried it myself. I fell flat on my face a couple of times, and figured that unicyclists were all nuts. Little by little, though, I learned. I figured if *they* could do it, *I* could do it.'

After completing his present journey, Wally (never at a loss for projects) plans to satiate his interest in another increasingly popular sport, cycle air planing. With a friend of his in Edmonton, he is also designing and building the world's biggest unicycle. The cycle will have a wheel three metres in diameter, the maximum that can be handled by a tall person. He also plans to write a book about his journey. 'In this case,' he assured me, 'fact is definitely stranger than fiction.' So if you happen to see a stranger-than-fiction figure wobbling and waving down your way, you might invite Wally in for a cup of coffee. Besides becoming part of a unique story, you'll hear a few good ones as well — guaranteed to inspire.

'The experiences I've had on this adventure so far have been priceless,' says Wobbling Wally Watts. 'Trying is the most important part of this life. The outcome really isn't as important as the effort. If you've got an idea to do something, give it all you've got. You can't go wrong.'





*Wobbling
Wally Waters*