

# A Day in the Life of a Cokernut

*04 March 2003. This is the first Mikefule story. Although I had been posting for a year or two before this, my posts were restricted to technical matters, and shortish comments around a paragraph or two long. This is the first full-length ride write up of all!*

Monday 3rd March, day off work, other plans go awry, and the day is free to ride. So which uni? The Coker's not been out for a while, so...

Drive to a safe parking place, and set off across level but slimy field to the hard grit path next to the River Trent. Ride upriver past the Nottingham Forest training pitch and receive mild mockery from players. Reflect that only 11 people are laughing at me, and 15 000 pay each week to laugh at them.

Up and over the suspension bridge - that's a steep climb and descent at each end, with cast iron bollards just that bit closer together than I'd like. I make it and feel smug. Then on to the next bridge, and an attempt to find a short cut leaves me stranded in the rough at the edge of a rugby pitch, and the first UPD of the day. Not bad after nearly 4 miles of varied riding.

Then along a cycle path, surprising a couple of anglers riding to the river on 20 inch shopper bicycles. (I think, but don't say, "Where's your trawler, mate?") Then the devil makes me follow a track I've never seen before, and soon the Coker's wheel is twice as heavy, and I'm slip sliding all over the place. I'm riding past steeply sloping woodland, and thinking I'll come back some time with the MUni. A mile later, someone has repaired the path with poorly compacted hard core (US = rubble?) and it's time to stand up and tip toe through the tulips.

And then I pass two teenage drunks (wish I could afford to drink at 11:00 a.m.!) who politely draw my attention to the absence of my other wheel. The pressure is on, now, because they are right at the bottom of a short but difficult slope, and then the scenery is flat river plain for miles, so they will see me if I UPD. I manage to stay on.

Is there a short cut back to the river bank? I end up climbing over a fence and through a hedge, then ride along a track until I come to a community of shacks and mobile homes. Seizing the initiative, I ask if it's OK to ride past, and is there a way along the river bank? The response: "Yes, but you won't make it on that thing." There is only one possible response, as the red mist comes down, and, with the exception of about 50 yards of real rough stuff, I *do* make it on that thing.

And I come out eventually at the A453 - the busiest road for miles, and not safe to ride. A notice advertises a footpath but it looks like a farmer's drive. I ride up, then politely dismount to walk through the farmyard. There's a massive German shepherd dog, but I don't flinch at his mock attack, and minutes later we are firm friends. But as soon as I push the unicycle, he bites the pedal!

I hope the farmer will come out so I can ask about the direction the path takes - it looks too hilly and muddy for the Coker. No farmer, so I walk back to the road - every time I try to ride, the German shepherd gets a bit too interested.

Then I cross the road and the dog follows me. I lead him back (stopping the traffic) and say, 'Home, boy!' As soon as I cross the road again, he follows me. Lorries brake sharply and a driver yells abuse. I reply that it's not my dog. I lead the dog back, and repeat the pattern a couple more times. Some drivers laugh sympathetically; others yell abuse.

Eventually, I decide it's not my problem. I ride off. The dog follows, but doesn't bite my ankles. A bus approaches. I tuck in to the side of the road. The dog runs out. The coach driver brakes and yells abuse. I shrug. It's not my bloomin' dog!

And eventually I escape, and I'm back on muddy slimy paths, and starting to wonder whether I should turn back... but am I a man or a mouse? The mud devil leads me on.

At last, back onto the road, and a couple of steep hills, and far too many big lorries. I dismount to let each one pass, and one of the drivers sneers rather too obviously for my taste. I explain that he should enter the highland games or open a pancake restaurant, what with him being such a tosser. We part, but not as friends.

Then down to the marina, where I discover that the café is closed. (Only in England can you not buy food or coffee at lunch time.)

They sell newspapers though. My money is a bit slimy because, being conscientious, I put my banana peels back in my rucksack instead of discarding them. Thoughtfully, I drop the coins, and scrub them on the carpet with my foot before handing them over, but the lady behind the counter still wrinkles her nose in disgust. Disgusted now? Wait until she has to vacuum the carpet. :O)

So the café is shut, and I add a mile loo to my route only find that the other cafe I know is also shut. And now I've done 25 miles and things are looking bad. Calories are needed, and my temper is fraying.

Into the Harrington Arms pub, where meals are listed at £14 for a main course. Panic! Until the barmaid shows me the 'Light Meals Menu' at 1/3 of that price.

And from here it's only a dozen miles home, but the pain fairy has removed my Viscount saddle and attached an engineering brick to the seat post. My legs are starting to cramp (all that cross country on the slimy mud has taken its toll) and progress becomes a series of 1 mile bursts followed by rather glum rests.

And let's hear it for the President of the Canal Boat Comedy Club of Grate (*sic*) Britain, whose wife/partner/floozy laughs rudely and derisively as I pass. He decides to entertain her by asking me where my other wheel is. I recall having heard this comment once before, and explain this too him perhaps a little too bluntly. My voice echoes off the bridge ahead, slightly surreal, and the silicon chip inside my head is switched to overload. I launch a brief but devastating tirade of abuse at him. Canal boats do 4 mph, Cokers do 12, so I know I'm safe.

Then I'm back on slimy rutted fields, and starting to regret things a bit. Three lady joggers oscillate attractively past, thanking me for stopping and waiting. Little do they know my legs are like two badly cramped blancmanges.

To my surprise, I get over the steep hump-backed and cobbled bridge that I've never previously managed on the Coker, then I'm back on the canal towpath, and I'm making good speed now, but stopping every couple of miles. People are finishing work and cycling home, and I am greeted with a mixture of surprise, contempt and admiration.

Where the canal runs alongside the main road, a few young males express carefully thought out opinions about my state of mind, and the optimal number of wheels for a pedal cycle. I ignore them. Only 2 miles to go and I'm back at the car, and 38 miles covered.

And on Tuesday? Legs hurt all day, and no sympathy from my workmates, who seem to regard unicycling as an aberration. One seems proud of the fact he couldn't ride 38 miles on a 2 wheeler.

If you don't have a Coker yet, why not?

*I surprised myself with this story when I came to edit it. In later stories, I aimed for a particular style of writing, but in this one, many aspects of that style are already present. I remember the ride well - especially the bit with the dog.*

# Another day in the life of a Cokernut

*15 March 2003. Not the most inspiring title for the second story, but at that time, I didn't know what a habit this would become! The Red Bull race is a 24 hour off road race, mainly for mountain bikers. It has become a tradition for small teams of unicyclists to enter and ride it as a relay. I was flattered to be invited to join one of the teams this year. The reference to toilet paper for front line troops was topical - a reference to recent newspaper stories about the British Army in Iraq.*

One of the more alarming aspects of my midlife crisis is my recent agreement to enter the Red Bull race. Time for some training!

So, as a gesture of good intent, I bought a stop watch. Today's plan was to ride flat out for an hour, and see how far I could go. That's an hour 'real time', rather than an hour 'riding time' as recorded by my trip computer.

First, choose your easy trail. The towpath of the Grantham Canal - a level compacted surface, a few short hills, and a few obstacles.

All ready, set, go! Two failed mounts because I was on a slight hill, and overconfident. Usually I'm 100% on freemounting the Coker. I decide it's 'only fair' to reset the stop watch - a task which takes several minutes because it's way too complicated, and keeps telling me it's Wednesday and the alarm's set for Friday tea time.

The first few miles are OK - just tozzing along at a comfortably fast pace. There's no sense in sprinting and falling off. I've got to pace myself for the distance anyway. There's a gate every mile or so, which means dismounting and walking across roads. It is cold and I'm riding into a headwind, and for the first mile or two, a nagging little demon says, 'Go home and read a book.' But I strive on, regardless.

Then shock! Horror! Dash it all! In a country which can't afford toilet paper for front line troops, and refuses to fund electric cattle prods for primary teachers, someone has decided to invest scarce financial resources in signs which say the towpath is closed. They've even hired a few diggers and bulldozers to park nearby to give a cheery appearance of work in progress.

So I decide to ride along a rough bit of farm track which looks like it might rejoin the towpath. And it is my good fortune to meet an honest son of the soil - a merry yeoman farmer who fancies himself as an ironist. 'Are you looking for me?' he inquires.

'No, I'm looking for the towpath,' I reply, with a winning smile.

'Well, as you can see, it's closed to members of the public. You shouldn't be here.'

Well, gee, thanks. I'm finally able to get advice about an alternative route by road. On my way back to the road, I become complacent, stop reading the surface, and have my first UPD of the day. The farmer's dog barks sardonically.

So off through the village, where there are various comical interactions with reversing horse boxes and elderly drivers, and I hit the first of the hills. There follows about 4 or 5 miles of narrow lanes, with long medium-steep inclines. And soon I'm looking at the stop watch and it says 0:55 and I'm ready for that final burst of speed... and I come round the corner to the biggest hill of all. It looks about, ooooh, 5 minutes to the top!

Slog slog slog up the hill, stopwatch in hand, and I get to 0:59.45 and I hear a car grinding up the hill behind me. Intuitive calculus tells me that the car will be overtaking at exactly the moment when I'm planning to dismount. I'm right, and in the last second or two, I pull onto the level grass verge and get ready to do a rear dismount, as the car growls nearer.

Now, I always dismount with my right hand on the front of the seat... and I have a right-handed stopwatch... and I haven't practised this... and somehow, in my attempt to compromise between these conflicting demands on my bodily extremities, I find myself with both feet off the pedals, coasting onto the verge, with neither hand touching the seat, and the car about 3 feet behind me.

With regrettable lack of grace, I land full length on my back on what the song calls, 'Yielding grassy sod.' The Coker sets off on a frolic of its own, landing some 10 yards away, with the rear seat bumper nicely garnished with a side salad of grass stems and hedge plants. The stopwatch says 1:00.00.09, so I've ridden for 9 hundredths of a second too long. I decide to ignore this recording error.

And I've done 10.44 miles in an hour, with a maximum speed of 14 miles. The computer shows 59:05 riding time, so just under a minute was lost talking to the farmer. Time for a Snickers - the artist formerly known as Marathon.

The ride back to the car is mainly by road, and, on average, is downhill, because I ended the outward ride at the top of a big hill. I decide to take it steady. Suddenly, the seat which I had not previously noticed, except in the very general sense that it wasn't missing, becomes uncomfortable.

At one stage I have to stop and wait whilst two horse riders gallop past - galloping on the public road. One of the horses almost slips over sideways. A car is trying to get past, and the riders are unaware, or don't care. And people call me crazy.

I've made it almost back to the car and I'm back on the towpath of the canal. The surface is perfectly flat, I'm tired and complacent. I don't notice the small outcrop of concrete and there's UPD 3 of the day.

Soon I'm back at the car. The computer shows a riding time of 2:00.03. As near as dammit, 1 hour and 1 minute's riding on the return leg, and a total distance of 20.10 miles - a return leg of 9.66 miles.

So comparing 'riding time': flat out and busting a gut, I did 10.44 miles in 59 minutes, averaging 10.61 mph; taking it steady, I did 9.66 miles in 61 minutes, averaging 9.5 mph.

The difference between flat out and steady was only about 11%, but the fatigue resulting was noticeably greater.

Of course, the climbing/descending and headwind/following wind, and the different surfaces made a difference. But I started the outward leg fresh, and I started the return leg tired. *I remember this ride well, and several of the incidents had stuck in my mind. It was only when I came to edit it I realised they all happened in the same ride. I did not exaggerate the closeness of the overtaking car, or the way that the Coker went off on its own. The reference to "Yielding grassy sod" comes from the hymn, "My faith it is an oaken staff."*

## Speed of thought

*16 March 2003. Not really a story, but I remember the incident well, and it amused me to re-read it.*

Out on a Coker ride today, I did 4 complete laps of the local country park, which has several large lakes. It's mainly flat, so from any place on the lakeside, it was possible to see me for about 25% of the time.

Four laps, in an hour, meaning that the small group of anglers saw me pass close by 4 times, and I was visible to them for around 15 minutes in total.

And on my fifth lap, one suddenly came up with, "Where's the other half of your bike?"

I replied, "You're the first today - if that helps at all."

He replied, "Yes, well I'm a clever dick, aren't I?"

Anglers are strange creatures. They were all in camouflage gear. Gosh! That'll help them to creep up on the unsuspecting fish!

# *Cokörhead, Ace, in Spades*

*18 March 2003. Cokerist, Cokeur, Cokernut, Cokernaut, Cokerhead - there are so many words for the brave individuals who pilot these beasts. Having a soft spot for Motörhead, I rather like Cokörhead. This is not really a story, but it was an attempt to put the riding experience into words, which is all my stories are meant to be. Notice also the first of the many wildlife references that have crept into my writing.*

When I got my Coker, I thought it was brilliant (Cokörhead - Overthrill), then I got used to flying about the place at high speed and falling off (Cokörhead - It's a Bomber), then I put the 125s on it, and did some silly speeds (Speed Freak) and then I got a bit tired of it. It was too big for road use on narrow lanes (I'm big on road safety - I see Coroner's Reports at work) and too heavy for Muni. After a while, languished a bit, with the light and fast 28 taking over the road work, the 24 taking over the being silly, and the 26 concentrating on serious off roading.

But recently, I've got back onto it, and done some serious miles, sometimes at speed, and sometimes on rough ground, and occasionally both. I did over 20 miles on Saturday, 12.5 on Sunday, 7.5 on Monday and about 8 tonight, and suddenly a new style of riding is taking over.

When you first get a Coker, you feel like you're riding by kind consent of the unicycle. All your starts, stops and turns are the result of lengthy negotiation and compromise. Then you get the hang of it, and it is unintimidating, but you realise it can't compete with a proper MUni for technical stuff, a 24 for manoeuvrability, or a 28 for safe road use. Eventually you decide it's like a Harley Davidson - it looks good, it has plenty of chrome, but it steers and stops like a pig, and has no acceleration. (Yes, I have ridden a Harley, and it was great fun, but...)

And now I've discovered that if you ride a Coker with commitment, keeping the speed up, choosing the route carefully, finding the best route along a difficult trail, and rushing the small obstacles instead of picking your way through them, it's great.

Then there's the Coker paradox - whilst it's moving fast, it's better balanced than any other unicycle, and will blast through stuff which would stop something smaller - but if it slows down too far, suddenly there's a lot of it to balance. And it's a long way down...

And sometimes you find yourself in the Cokerzone... that point in the ride when you should be slowing down, but you realise you're going faster, because you're going more smoothly, and reading the trail better, and you won't stop for anything - until suddenly, after 3 or 4 miles of going for it, you notice you left the Coker behind about 5 yards ago, and it's time to find a safe place to land. The Coker pentathlon: ride, fly, run, slide, writhe. (I hate the writhing.)

And after riding it hard for 40 minutes, it's just so easy to ride it steadily - it does it all by itself - and you can warm down on your way to the car, watching the full moon rising pinkly over the river, a heron flapping low over the water, perfectly reflected in every detail, and water voles scurrying across the bank, then freezing motionless, hoping you've not seen them.

You know you want one. Cokörhead - it's Ace in Spades.

# 1:46.12 In the life of a Cokeur

03 May 2003

Today's plan was to get up early and do a long ride. However, on Tuesday, I did an hour's time trial on the Coker, Wednesday I had a particularly strenuous evening's fencing, Thursday I was out with the Morris men, dancing in the May Day sunset, and Friday I was fencing... so on Saturday I sprang out of bed at about 10:30, feeling like it would take some time to get the old legs working properly.

After a couple of hours doing chores etc., I get the Coker out. On Tuesday, I was riding it like a demigod; today, I mount with the grace and precision of a panda with a migraine. I ride the short distance to the car, and think, "Hmmm... why do my legs feel like jelly?"

I drive out to one of my regular starting places. I mount like a spaniel climbing a palm tree and zigzag off towards the track, gradually recovering my poise.

A lady opens the gate, steps to one side and says (I *think* pleasantly) "Ok, so I'm impressed." This saves me the indignity of a public failure to mount, and I ride through onto the tarmac track. There's a stiff breeze blowing into my face. At Coker speeds, it is roaring across my ears enough to be distracting. Do other Cokeurs get this, or do I just have particularly protuberant ears?

For the first time ever on this section, I find a herd of cattle blocking my path. Cattle and Cokeurs have this in common: they are highly suspicious of each other. By a combination of wobbling and shoeing, I'm able to clear a path through the herd, and find a route that isn't pat-mined.

Then onto the cattle grid, where I dismount. Riding across cattle grids is really easy, but you only have to get it wrong once to realise how very very dangerous it is. When I UPDd on one a few weeks back, I know I was lucky not to snap an ankle, or buckle the wheel. Treat cattle grids with respect, and save a lifetime of feeling in your bones when it's going to rain.

There then follows a short section through the woods with two 'up' obstacles, two 'up and over' obstacles, and a 'dooooown we go' obstacle. I manage them all except the first 'up', but that one's been changed recently, and I've never managed it yet. At least it's more mounting practice, and I'm starting to get back in the groove.

As I blast expertly along a narrow and twisty track through the woods, ducking to avoid low branches, there are three 'yoofs' in among the trees who wittily remark, 'Yooooonicycle, ooooooh, yooooonicycle, oooooooohh!'

I wonder whether any of them can do anything at all that I couldn't do, and why I might want to mock them if they could. It seems to me they can probably only do one thing that half the world's population can't - pee against a tree - and that doesn't give them much by way of credentials for mocking unicyclists.



Be that as it may... I dismount for a gate, freemount well, and then it's half a mile or so of bumpy single track by the river. Then I try to ride up a short compacted mud and grit ramp, but I annoy myself by UPDing unnecessarily. I mount, ride back down, intending to turn and ride up again. I fluff the turn and UPD again. It's all good mounting practice - the mounting is mounting.

I make it up the ramp, then it's a section of rough track, past a burned out car (are these the Western values we forcibly export to the rest of the world?) and up a long ramp onto a favourite 'training circuit'.

This is a wierd place - or possibly a weird place, I can never remember. There are two lakes, way above the level of the surrounding land, and held in by huge banks of earth. Imagine an iron age hillfort with a leak in the bathroom that had gone undetected because the tribe was away at the coast for a month - that sort of thing. What it does give me is a figure 8 route around the two lakes, on a packed grit and mud track along the top of the 'ramparts'.

What it also gives me is complete exposure to the strong wind. So I go flying down one side of the lake, as fast as a rapid thing, then on the way back, I'm leaning into it, pedalling like stink, and doing about 6mph. In a strong headwind, the Coker loses its famous momentum factor, so when I lose concentration for a moment, I suddenly find myself with a short walk back to the Coker. I swear merrily.

After a couple of laps, dropping down the 'ramparts' twice (wheeeeeeeeeee... ooooooer... aaaaah... phew!) and riding back up the ramp, it's time to move on. I ride further up the river, under a railway bridge, then I'm faced with The Previously Unrideable Obstacle, *tadadadaaa!*

The PUO is a steepish slope, of varying angle, paved with small concrete paving slabs which have all settled unevenly. It's too big to 'rush'. The only route up is diagonally across the slope, and to make it harder, the slope is convex both in plan and elevation. I've ridden down it, but never up. And now I do it **FIRST TIME!** These little milestones are what makes our sport so rewarding, don't you think?

After that, it's a swoop down and onto a rough track, and there's a mud bath. Experience tells me that the ground under the mud is deeply rutted, and that the mud is supplemented with motor oil and general debris. Do I dismount and tiptoe through, or do I go for it? That's right: I go for it, get half way across, UPD, and land with impressive force in the mud. My shoes are instantly lots heavier.

I find a short track which looks like it might lead to wasteground. It leads to a disreputable looking scrapyard. I turn back, then ride a mile or two through an industrial estate to the Country Park. The Country Park offers a variety of routes around the lakes and through the woods. Because the weather's not too good (let's be honest, here, it's just started to rain!) the park's not too crowded, and the people who are there aren't the abusive idiots I sometimes meet.

Part way through the woods, I meet a father with his two sons. One child is crying, after UPDing from his 5 speed bicycle. The other child is struggling to put the chain back on. Father

is helpfully watching. I stop to offer assistance. The chain is doubled back on itself a couple of times, and it's like a Chinese puzzle. It takes me 2 or 3 minutes to do it. I doubt the child (or his father) would have succeeded in a month. While I'm doing it, Dad makes a couple of half hearted missing wheel comments. I remark that at least the Coker doesn't have a chain, and that's the main reason I bought it.

Job done, I mount and ride off, the family's thanks ringing in my imagination.

This is about the 4th time this year I've had to replace a chain for a cyclist when I've been out on the uni. They have a problem, I arrive on a Coker, fix the problem, tip my hat, and ride away. My imagination runs away with me:

Child: Who was that man who saved us?

Father: Son, that's the man they call the Lone Cokeur.

Memo to self: buy black eye-mask and white hat, and get some silver crank bolts made to use as calling cards. (?Query: film rights... seek agent.)

Within minutes, it is raining quite hard. I'm a few miles from the car, and I know I'm going to be soaked anyway, so I don't take the most direct route back. As I ride round the back of a clump of trees, I meet an elderly couple on mountainbikes. The old man is in a world of his own, and zigs across my path, sees me at the last moment and nearly falls in the river. His wife is fiddling with her gear shifters. She sees me and says, "That's what I should have got - then I wouldn't have all these flaming gears!" More evidence in support of my theory that 90% of bicycles are overdesigned for their real purpose.

Back through the industrial estate, and then it's the oily mudbath, where once again I inadvertantly make a crater. One disadvantage of the Coker is that it's so tall, heavy, and slow steering that you can lose it very quickly in a side slip.

Then it's the obstacle previously known as The Previously Unrideable Obstacle. Riding down it is easy... except that it's been raining for a while, and the lichen on the slabs now has the friction coefficient of buttered Teflon. Very quickly, I find I have unwanted but interesting experimental data which tend to support Newton's law of gravity, and laws of motion.

From here, it's a short blast down the river bank, then along the tarmac track, and back to the car.

The trip computer shows 1:44:12. I've had no stops for rests, but a few dismounts, so I reckon that's 1:46:12 really. Top speed (as always!) shows as 14mph, and distance is 16.5 miles.

So that's an average speed for the journey of 9.32mph, and an average RIDING speed (excluding the 2 minutes added) of 9.5mph. Not bad on mixed terrain, and often with a strong headwind.

# On Top of Old Cokey...

*10 May 2003 This seems to be my first story of a ride in Sherwood Forest. Over two years later, the places mentioned in this story are very familiar indeed.*

A day of unusual comments, and slight achievements...

Another late night, followed by another late morning... but (to paraphrase the late great Buddy Holly) "the sun was out, the sky was blue, there was not a cloud to spoil the view" so it was time to go a Coking, along the mountain track, la la la la, la la la la, a knapsack on my back.

Having recently boasted of my almost 100% success rate on freemounting, I was disappointed to need two attempts on flat tarmac. Within a hundred yards, I had to dismount for a gate, and again, it took two goes to remount. This was a pattern repeated throughout much of the morning. I was wearing shoes with stiff and heavily treaded soles, which might have made a difference, but I think it was just fatigue. I know my legs were none too keen when I invited them to propel the Coker up the first hill. My three sports - Morris dancing, unicycling and fencing - are all leg-intensive, and occasionally, the legs just run out of push.

I had forgotten my trip computer. This was probably a good thing, as if the numbers are there, I find I 'ride for the numbers' which tempts me to take the faster option at junctions. I sometimes miss the more interesting side trails. Pointless vanity, but I can be as vain as the next man (unless he's Tony Blair, in which case, I concede!).

Today, unable to record my distance and speed for posterity, I ambled where the mood took me, picking some winding and undulating single track. There were patches of sand and gravel. Sand must be the worst surface to Coker on (except for thin ice over a pool of sharks, I suppose) and I UPDd a few times. I wasn't really getting into my stride.

Eventually, I popped out of the woods into an area set aside for mountain bikers/BMXers, with a few swoops, ramps and jumps. There were lots of kids there, and I thought, "Here we go, wait for the merciless scorn." But I was wrong. The first comment was, "Hey, mint! Look, a unicycle!"

This spurred me to essay a couple of the ramps. I UPDd gracefully as I crested one, remounted neatly, and swooped down the next and across some broken ground and out of sight, followed by shouts of encouragement.

Dividing the MTB/BMX area is a high bank of earth with an undulating top. I was able to remount on this and ride along the top - silhouetted against the skyline in all my glory - then down a big swoop and up a ramp where I didn't quite manage to get over the top edge. Posing shamelessly, I baled out at exactly the right moment to fly over the top of the ramp without the unicycle, and landed running, making the whole thing look a lot more dramatic than it was.

Quitting while I was ahead, I rode off into the forest, eventually finding myself at a Visitor Centre, where I stopped for coffee, and was 'interviewed' at length on the subject of unicycling by a middle aged lady mountain biker. She had some intelligent questions, and took a real interest in the answers. Made a nice change.

From there, it was back into the forest, turning this way and that, and convincing myself that I knew where I was. Suddenly, I saw my car, exactly where I'd left it! I'd come full circle. About 8 miles/an hour of riding and I was back where I'd started! D'oh!

I decided to repeat the early part of my route, and ended up back at the MTB/BMX area where the same kids were still riding, and had been joined by a few others. The first lot were able to be 'real cool' because they 'knew' me and they were boasting to their friends about how good I was!

This time I managed to nail the two ramps where I'd failed before. I've done them both before on a 26, but on the Coker, it was quite, er..., exciting. Must've looked impressive.

After a quick lap of the rideable obstacles I stopped for water and chocolate, and I actually had a nice 10-15 minute chat with the kids, who were asking sensible questions, and taking a real interest.

One lad asked, "Does it rock forwards and backwards where it joins the wheel? Isn't that difficult to balance?"

To illustrate, I held the wheel still, and moved the seat and forks forwards and backwards. "Wouldn't it be easier if it was fixed in position?" he asked.

Hmmmm.

Er...

To illustrate, I held the fork crown and tyre so that the forks were fixed in position, then pushed the pedal to turn the wheel.

"Oh yes!"

To his credit, he had quickly realised the disbenefits of his proposed modification!

Then a man arrived on a posh mountain bike - all springs and discs and stuff. "Has anyone seen my computer? It must have flown off when I did a jump." Everyone did a bit of a search. The man was grateful, little realising that if one of the kids had found it, he would probably have charged a ransom - we were near Mansfield, after all.

Eventually, it became clear that the computer was permanently AWOL. The man explained to me glumly, "It must have come off when I did a jump."

"I know how you feel," I replied, "I lost my front wheel on a jump... and my handlebars. I'm having to get by with the bits I have left."

The man laughed.

One of the kids commented, "That was a really crap joke!"

"Yes, but how many times do you think I've heard it?"

Point made, and laughter all round.

From there I rode on towards a place known locally as 'The Desert'. As I came to a junction in the track, I saw a family party of bicyclists ahead of me. They saw me approaching and stopped and pulled to the side of the path. I heard the usual rustle of "Hey look," and "Wow, look at that..." and couldn't resist...

At this junction, there is an opportunity to ride up a short steep bank of earth, to still stand briefly and turn, then swoop down, ducking under a branch, up over a smaller bank, then drop down a steep slope back onto the path. I've done it before, I knew it could be done, I had an audience... I did it.

Cheers all round, then one of the bicyclists joked, "I could have done that with no wheels at all!" An original line! I was having a good day for comments.

I then went to The Desert, which is an area of colliery/quarry land, with (as its name suggests) lots of sand, and not much vegetation. There are a few tracks and obstacles, but when the sand isn't damp and hard packed, it's too difficult to Coker on. So instead, I clambered up onto an old disused railway embankment, and rode along the track bed. This is a weird section of track, because it undulates with a rise and fall of 2 - 3 feet, with crests varying from 2 - 6 feet apart. You can almost, but not quite, get a rhythm going. It's certainly good practice - and again, I'm high on the skyline, feeling like a Western hero.

Down from there, and back into the forest, where I follow the signs to "Off Road Mountain Bike Trail. Danger - Rough Terrain - Experienced Cyclists Only."

Well, wouldn't you? And frankly, most of the course was easier than much of what I'd ridden already. This is our society: we have a massive area of forest, and we package it all into two Visitor Centres, and one "Off Road Mountain Bike Trail". How many people take the shortest route through the forest, on the wide straight forestry roads, to ride a half mile or so of designated Off Road Mountain Bike Trail? How many go out for the day and never go further than the Visitor Centre? At least it keeps them out of my way!

I meet a man on the Trail, leading his young son who's on his own bike. The man stops to chat, and again, has intelligent questions, a real interest, an understanding of the principles (fixed wheel, choice of wheel sizes, etc.) and he makes no inane comments! Have I died and gone to unicyclists' heaven?

And a few minutes later, as I blast past a group of resting bicyclists, basking on the bank like a colony of seals, one looks up, smiles and says, "Blimey! Couldn't you make it any lighter?" A 'knowing' cyclist's take on the missing components gag - I'm impressed.

A blow by blow account of the whole ride would bore you all, but by the time I got back to the car, I'd ridden for 2½ hours, with a couple of short stops, so I'd probably done 15 - 20 miles. In that time, my freemounting had improved almost back to my usual standard, my legs had freed up, and were spinning properly again, and I'd ridden one or two obstacles, and one particular hill, which had always beaten me before.

It wasn't a 'great' ride, and I set no records, but really, this ride was what a Coker's all about: the ability to cover distance, on varied terrain, at a decent speed, and in relative comfort. It looks good, it feels good, and usually, it gets a friendly response from people.

On the 26 or 24, I would have stayed in a smaller area, probably repeating several of the obstacles, until I got bored. The 28 wouldn't have coped with the ground conditions (it has a narrow tyre). The better I get, the more versatile I find the Coker to be. Should you buy one? Yes!

*I enjoyed re-reading this story. "I could have done that with no wheels at all!" is possibly the best comment I've ever had.*

# More Fun at Pi Yards Per Rev

13 May 2003

Tuesday night is training night, but the need for discipline is becoming apparent. I'd had a lousy day at work, we'd had heavy rain and hail, and more threatened, and it was gusting about a force 5 or 6. Staying in was an attractive option, but we Cokeurs are made of sterner stuff.

Over the last few weeks, I've tried to develop a standard training route, so that I can measure my progress. I ride fast for a timed hour and then check how far I've gone. Then I tend to do a few 'warm down' miles and include some more interesting/technical sections.

I start at a place called Trent Fields, next to the River Trent, and almost within sight of Trent Bridge Cricket Ground. I ride a couple of miles by the river, then a short section of road, and then I get to the National Water Sports Centre. Then it's about 4 laps of the main rowing lake. A typical fast hour is somewhere around 12 miles.

Tonight, everything was against me - mental attitude, weather, and mental attitude - and I decided *not* to make a serious attempt on my personal best (12.44 miles in an hour). I set off across the fields at a steady pace. To my left was the skateboard/BMX half pipe. For the first time in my life, I saw a skateboarder land a trick!

As I rode past, one of the kids shouted in an off-hand way (if this is possible) "Oh look... it's the unicycle."

Read that again: *the* unicycle. I'm part of the scenery now, worthy of remark - like a beautiful sunset - but not surprising or weird. And no abuse! A few weeks ago, kids on the same half pipe were pouring scorn and abuse on me as I rode past. This is progress of a sort.

(I lied, of course: I am both surprising and weird, but the unicycle now acts as a decoy and the kids don't notice.)

It was well windy. At the National Water Sports Centre, the wind always blows straight down the lake, except when it blows straight up the lake. I know this - I've lived near it for many years. Imagine, then, my surprise to find the wind gusting *ACROSS* the lake. Here's me hammering down the side of the lake on a Coker, leaning sideways into the wind at a crazy angle - most uncomfortable.

The strange thing about the Coker, if you ride it hard enough and fast enough on a flat surface, every road leads you to the little Scottish hamlet of Crotchnumbness.

One nice thing about training around the lake is that you tend to meet the same people who are running or cycling in the opposite direction. Most of them are friendly; some are encouraging; a few are patronising ("Oh, well done, you're doing well." - this from a jogger wobblebottoming around the lake at [walking pace + 10%] while I'm doing 14 mph on my third lap on a 36 inch unicycle).

Today, there were three old blokes jogging around the lake. They were clearly serious runners, and were making good time. The second time I met them, they were strung across the road, so I moved to within about 2 inches of the grass at the left of the road, then put out my left arm to indicate that was the way I was going. Two of the joggers nodded in acknowledgement and drifted to their left (my right), but the third moved straight into my path, made eye contact and kept running towards me. What was going through his head? In a minute, it would be a Viscount seat!

Having tried the polite method, I tried this: I ducked my head down to break eye contact, and accelerated towards him. I looked up, and there were arms and legs everywhere, and the jogger was sporting the largest pair of eyes I'd ever seen.

I thought I'd pushed it too far, because I wasn't sure which way he would dive. I guessed correctly, swerved, and as he span in my wake, I shouted, "Well, I did signal!"

To his credit, on the next two laps, he was very friendly.

Another confrontation: the lake is home to numerous Canada geese. I notice that all the goslings tend to be gathered into one place, and a couple of the geese sort of act as nannies, while the rest of the geese relax and think goosey thoughts.

It had been a sunny but cold day, so the warmest place for the goslings was the tarmac road surface. On my first lap, the geese left it to the very last moment to move, despite me clapping my hands and shouting a friendly warning. One cute but foolish gosling ran the wrong way. The Coker went left, the gosling went left; the Coker went right the gosling went right. Had I not been a bunny-hugging vegetarian, this would have been an ideal supper opportunity.

As I swerved one last time to miss the desperate gosling, one of the ganders decided it was time to wade in, and suddenly I was confronted with the full wings out and hissing beak routine. I can picture the scene tonight in the Duck and Grouse public bar as he tells the tale of how he faced down a 40 mile-an-hour penny farthing all on his own.

I had not set out for a 'personal best time', but as I got nearer to the end of the hour, I got my head down a bit and upped the pace. At the hour, I'd done 11.44 miles - a mile (or 8%) less than my personal best, but given the strong wind, not too bad. Most satisfying of all was that I'd put in a reasonable time (3rd best ever) and ended with lots left in reserve.

In my warm down lap, I usually ride over the tops of the grassy banks at the side of the lake, as well as following some of the rough tracks by the river and around the other lakes. The grassy banks are great, because they offer a reasonably predictable surface (mown grass) and a range of options. Some of the hills are quite steep, and there are summits, saddles, and all manner of challenging topographical features. I like the challenge of what I'd call 'tactical hill climbing': picking the best route to get to the top, rather than just slogging my way up.

One part of my favourite route takes me to a top, then along a ridge, down into a bit of a saddle, then up onto a sort of grassy dome. The top of the dome is only a few yards across, and the sides are pretty steep. My plan was to ride to the top of the dome, make a sharp 90 degree turn



to the left and drop down the short but steep slope onto an easy grassy run off. The alternative was to go straight on down a slope too steep for me to ride on the Coker, with no run off; or to turn right and do a long steep descent, wasting all my gravity karma.

So, I rode to the top of the dome and did a sharp left as the pedal went down... then a huge gust of wind caught the wheel and blew it straight again, as if I were perched on a massive weather vane. So I turned left with the next pedal stroke, and it happened again! Eek! One more pedal stroke and I was 3.14 yards closer to the near vertical drop than I had intended. My next attempt was desperate and I turned just more than 90 degrees, and you've guessed it - I weathercocked the other way! This was a new and challenging aspect of Cokering.

By the end of the ride, I'd done 19.56 miles in 1:54.02 (riding time, not elapsed time) and, bizarrely, my maximum speed was showing as 23mph.

This was clearly wrong, as at the end of the fast section, as always, it was showing 14mph. This freak reading has happened once before (I think it was 20 mph last time) but I can't work out why. I know it's nothing to do with idling, because (a) I always place the magnet carefully when I set up a computer, so it isn't in position when I idle on my strong side; and (b) I didn't idle.

*I remember the incident with the three elderly joggers all too well. I honestly thought I was going to kill the bloke. The weathervane incident too, sticks in my mind, although I wouldn't have known they were on the same ride.*

# Moron the Coker

20 May 2003

Until very recently, I had done no competitive sport since I left school over 20 years ago. (The fencing I have sometimes mentioned here is a very new development.) Then I got hoodwinked into putting my name down for the Red Bull 24 hour Mountain Mayhem - and suddenly I found myself 'put on the spot'. So Tuesday night is training night, and I do a 'serious' fast and long ride.

Boy! Am I learning about myself! I'd had a lousy day at work (that makes about 5,040 lousy days at work so far), it had been blowing half a gale all day, and raining hard, my legs were tired, my back was aching. Was I still 'up for it'? Yes.

So I'm 5 miles into the ride and a downpour of Biblical proportions starts. I'm riding into a wind that's gusting almost too hard to pedal against. My back is really deteriorating. Do I give up? No.

And when it became obvious that I was nowhere near in with a chance of a record distance, did I slacken the pace? No.

So, I've learned a lot about myself: I've learned I am a moron. :0)

*See the happy moron  
He doesn't give a damn  
I wish I was a moron  
My God! Perhaps I am!*

(Not one of my own.)

Storming around the rowing lake in a heavy downpour, I turned the corner into the wind, and nearly stopped dead. I've ridden a Coker 50 miles in a day on 125s, and I don't think I could have pedalled against the stronger gusts on anything less than the 150s that are fitted now. It's head down, hold the seat and grind into the wind time.

The weekly Enterprise dinghy with reefed sails was nowhere to be seen. An old GP14 was plodding along under full sail, unperturbed - perhaps weighed down with firewood, ironware and cheap tin trays, or something like that. Two Toppers made a brief, exciting and ultimately horizontal appearance on the lake. Two rescue boats were out - one drifting about as the occupant fiddled with the outboard motor. (Been there, done that!)

Last week, I saw a heron trying to land into a strong wind and being caught in a downdraught. The result was er... inelegant. This week, I saw a heron take off down wind, and never have I seen a heron so surprised, as it did about 0 - 40mph in 2 seconds!

One good thing: the inclement weather had kept all the elderly lemming-class joggers away. However, several members of a bicycle club were training around the lake in the opposite direction to me. Their reactions ranged from friendly and amused to stony faced indifference.

The rowers seem to have accepted me as part of the scenery, although there was the odd comment from rower to rower, teasing each other that they couldn't keep up with the unicycle!

In the course of the ride, I overtook single sculls, pairs, fours and at least one eight, as well as a dragon boat and the GP14. (I don't count the Toppers, as their crews were swimming - in defiant breach of the notices saying, "No swimming!")

The pedant in me wants to amend those notices to something like, "Swimming is only allowed as an emergency response to inadvertent separation from a boat or other waterborne craft, or in the event of slipping from the bank." It'll never catch on. Perhaps that's not pedantic, but nit-picking - a small but not unimportant distinction, I think.

After the hour, I had done 'only' 11.68 miles. Considering that my first ever measured hour was 10.44 miles, followed by 11.11 on the second attempt, that's not too bad, but it's a long way short of a personal best. A small victory, though: the top recorded speed was not 14, but a whole (count 'em) 15 mph! This was no doubt on one of the wind assisted stretches, but I see it as progress because it isn't the power that's a problem, it's the co-ordination and the nerve needed to go faster.

And at the end of the hour? Soaking wet, but warm, I did a bit of gentle off-roading, and a few easy hill climbs and descents. Next to the canoe slalom course I did a complete rolling UPD in the wet grass. Canoeists can't mock: they spend half their time upside down, and if they don't, it's because they're not trying. (I know, I been there, done that, and dried the T shirt.)

By the time I got back to the car, I was absolutely soaked. I took my T shirt off, and the wet fabric was airtight, so that it formed a partial vacuum as I pulled it upwards - something I remember from my canoeing days. The acoustics are really strange, and it feels all clammy - yuk! And we do this for fun?

And best of all? 20.03 miles in 1:55.07. That's riding time, rather than elapsed time, so add a bit for 3 or 4 dismounts, and I reckon that's still 20 mixed miles in adverse conditions in under 2 hours. Buy a Coker; you know you want one.

*I trained hard for the Red Bull - several evenings a week, and 20 miles at a time. Four days before the event, I fell off at low speed on mown grass, but landed wrong, and chipped a bone in my hand. I had to cry off. I'm still not 100% sure the others believe me. I do know I will never reach that level of fitness and commitment again. It was great while it lasted.*

# A great weekend and show

*01 June 2003 A nice change for me to find a story that isn't just about storming around on the Coker. Like most unicyclists, I started out on a 20, and, like many, I had some idea of incorporating it into performances. I bought my first unicycle in 1987, rode it regularly for a couple of years, then it went in the shed, only to reappear once or twice a year for Morris dancing events. Buying a MUni in about 2002 opened my eyes to what could be achieved on one wheel.*

This weekend was the annual Thaxted Ring Meeting - that's a massive meeting of Morris dancers in the small Essex town of Thaxted. I usually take the unicycle. In fact, I've been stopped by members of the public as far away as St. Abbs in Scotland and asked, "Aren't you the one with the one wheeled bike at Thaxted?" (Fame, but, sadly, no fortune.)

The climax of the weekend is a massive show in the main street. It's a proper English main street, with houses, cottages and a couple of pubs, and a market hall. The slender spire of the church stands guard at the top of the hill. Most of the buildings are hundreds of years old, with traditional Essex pargetting: decorative plaster work on the outside. It's real 'chocolate box' scenery.

And it's under the flight path for planes landing at nearby Stansted Airport, but you can't have everything.

For a couple of hours, the main street is closed to traffic, and a crowd of about 2,000 people watches displays of dancing by about 20 Morris teams. And while that's happening, the Fools (including me) go round the crowd and keep them awake with tricks and routines.

A few years ago, all I could do with the unicycle was ride it. I could freemount most of the time, and I could steer, slow down, and stop. That was it. I 'entertained' the crowd by pretending (sometimes too convincingly) that I was about to fall off.

Last year, I learned to idle and reverse, but not confidently. I included a bit in the show. It helped me keep at the right pace in the procession before the show starts - we have to process a few hundred yards down a hill at a speed slow enough for the musicians to walk and play.

This year, the idling is 100% reliable, as is the freemounting. Even with a few pints of beer inside me, the unicycle knew who was in charge.

And the reaction from the crowd was so much better. With confident idling, I could stop and talk to people. At the end of the conversation, I could reverse away and three point turn before riding off. If people asked if I could do any tricks, I was able to idle one footed, await the applause, then idle one footed with the free leg dangling. If you let on that something is an achievement, people will applaud it. My clapping my hands under the free leg trick raised a few laughs, and, for some reason, a little bit of hopping on the spot really impressed.

I know I'm more of an entertainer than a technical skills man, but I was pleasantly surprised by how much difference those few skills made not only to my confidence, but to the impact on the crowd.

Two separate people made serious enquiries about where they could buy unicycles, and asked sensible questions about wheel size, price and so on - they were both serious enough to write the answers down and This sort of laid back performance gives people chance to show an interest in unicycling. In a way, I think it's better than performing in a style which makes it look intimidatingly difficult.

I might get some leaflets printed with FAQs!

Anyway, a great weekend, with lots of beer, lots of dancing, music and song, and made better by a slight leavening of unicycling.

# This Sand That

*19 July 2003 This was the first story to be too long to post. RSU allows 1,000 words per post. I usually write the stories off line, then copy and paste them. I had to put the last bit of this story as a reply to the first!*

My first time back on the Coker since my 20 miles without a dismount nearly 2 weeks ago. Today the weather was mixed: hot, humid, windy, clouds threatening storms later. It took an effort of will to pack my kit and go for a ride - I knew it'd be fun, but I knew it'd be hard work.

The Coker had been in at the local bike shop for the wheel to be trued and the spokes to be tensioned. That's the second time in just over a year, and I guess I'm getting about 250 - 300 miles between 'services'. It's hard to say exactly as I only fitted a computer after a few months of riding, and occasionally I forget to take it anyway.

So, I park my car in the delightfully-named Deerdale, in Sherwood Forest, and set off - straight up a moderately steep and long hill. The air seems short of oxygen today, so I soon divert from this climb onto a single track path through the forest. The spokes are knocking and banging every so often. Was the wheel repair a waste of money? I think glum thoughts.

The centre of the path is a deep single rut of dry sandy soil, chewed up by horses' hooves, so I have to ride on the narrow shoulders of firm soil to each side, ducking now and again to avoid low branches. From time to time I have to cross the sandy rut to find a better line. Within less than a mile, the inevitable happens, and I put my new wrist guards to the test! I roll out of the fall and the sun cream on my arm picks up a fine coating of sand and dust. Hands and wrists are unhurt.

A few hundred yards later, a second UPD, this time with no excuse.

I'm now in a section of the forest that I haven't visited before, and I follow a rough gravelly track down a shallow gradient, forest to the left, cornfield to the right, until I come to a barrier. Hmmmm. Should I proceed past the barrier? I know that nearby there is a paintball skirmish place, and there's also a military training area somewhere in the forest. A lone rider on a big shiny unicycle would be just toooooo tempting!

Then a 4x4 pulls up at the barrier. The driver's wearing a buff coloured shirt which looks a bit uniform-like. I act casual, and check my computer, fiddle with the adjustment of the seat, and so on. I notice that the magnet on the spoke is too close to the sensor - hence the banging noise I could hear! The wheel repair was OK after all.

Suddenly, the 4x4 reverses, then comes round the end of the barrier, dropping 2 wheels into the crops growing in the field next to the track. He's not a security man at all - he's a dog walker, looking for somewhere to park in the middle of the forest. Lazy sod!

I decide to go past the barrier, and I follow a road up hill and come to a group of farm buildings. Am I trespassing? I've not passed a warning notice. Ahead of me, I see a pair of open gates with notices on them saying 'Private, keep out!'.

I'd better not go past the gates then... er... hang on... if I can read the notices when the gates are open... er... I'm on the side out of which I should keep! I nonchalantly whiz through the gates to legitimacy... then I see that one side of the road has about a 10 foot (3 metre) security fence in very good condition... and I see a family of cyclists, mother, father, and young kids, all obviously law abiding, and all on the OTHER side of this fence. Hmmmmm. Jus' keep pedalling, Mike!

I pop out onto a tarmac road, follow that for a bit, and find myself at the visitor centre, with cycle hire (all new-fangled two wheelers) and a cafe. I'm hot, sweaty and tired, so I decide to stop. I think of this cafe as The Surprise Coffee Stop, because so far I have found it about 5 times, but I have NEVER found it deliberately! Navigating in the forest is like that.

Coffee is a diuretic - a bad thing to drink when you are doing exercise on a hot day, but the caffeine god has to be satiated. I sit drinking my coffee and listening to the parents ignoring their children: "Look, Mummy, a one wheeled bike..." "Yes dear..." "No, Mummy, it is, it's a yoooonicycle..." "Yes, dear." etc. I then pick up the one wheeled bike and check the computer - a paltry 3.6 miles, and I'm tired already.

From here, it's down hill for a bit, then I find some interesting side tracks, a couple of challenging steep inclines, and I get into the Coker Zone: not fast, but smooth and satisfying. Most of the bicyclists make friendly comments or say nothing. I notice that I take the interesting short cuts, but they all, without exception, stick to the hard packed smooth forest tracks. It must be the weight of all those extra components holding them back!

8 miles or so into the ride, I'm swooping along a packed mud track, and there are a few puddles blocking my way. I get tired of avoiding them, and splash through a couple, keeping the speed down so I don't get soaked. One puddle is almost circular - about 37 inches in diameter, I'd guess. I ride into it slowly, and discover that beneath the surface, the puddle is almost a hemisphere! The wheel drops in deep and stops dead! Fortunately, I'm going slowly, and I have the control to let the forks and seat gently swing forwards around the axle, depositing me neatly on my feet. So elegant! I couldn't repeat the perfection of that move if you paid me.

About 9 miles into the ride, I see a mountain biker fiddling with his machine. I stop to offer help, but all he is doing is using a pointy stick to remove mud from the moving parts of his clipless locking pedals. I wittily remark on the benefits of technology, and how much simpler a leather strap would be. We get chatting. He is about 60 years old, appears blind in one eye, and the other eye doesn't look too good either. He's on a 35 mile ride, on his own, and has clearly been doing some serious off-roading as he and his bike are very muddy.

He directs me to an area of the forest he knows as 'The Jungle' and warns me of one or two particular hazards to be found there. I'm pleased that he makes no assumptions about what can or can't be achieved on a unicycle. Then he spoils the effect by suddenly noticing that my 'bike' is a unicycle - he does a classic 'double take' worthy of a silent film! To his credit, he carries on the conversation without making any banal or silly comment about the unicycle. He says one last thing as I'm mounting, I miss the mount, and he apologises for putting me off. (I would have missed anyway. By now, I'm hot and tired.)

Next, I find a short section with some hard-packed mud 'obstacles' clearly made for BMX/MTB use. Nothing too big, but fairly steep. I impress myself by riding them all first time. Then I get to the 'very very dangerous' off road course. In the middle of many many square miles of forest, a short section has been designated 'rough terrain, suitable for experienced cyclists only'. As always, I ride it with no major problems - just one UPD when I make a last second decision to go the hard way, run off the edge of the path by a few inches and hit a small birch sapling, which folds beneath the Coker's wheel. My momentum fails me and I make an undignified dismount. The sapling springs up and seems undamaged.

As always, the path from the off road course to the main track is harder to ride than the course itself! I UPD again, before realising that just because I have a handle, it doesn't mean I can't do the traditional arm-waving thing instead. The handle's a big help on hills and rough ground in a fairly straight line, but when weaving between trees on a narrow winding track, holding it can cramp my turning a bit.

From here, I ride up a long and pretty steep gradient. I can see a colony of bicyclists sunning themselves at the top. It looks like a complete family group. They watch me ride up the hill; surely they can see that I'm a cyclist, not the cabaret? Nope! The alpha male makes the traditional call of "Do you know you've lost your front wheel?" This must be part of a highly evolved courtship display, because the alpha female laughs appreciatively. I can smell the pheromones.

I slap my hand on my helmet in a gesture meant to convey, "D'oh! Do you really think I got to be this good without hearing that one before, plonker?" Clearly they are not good at reading sign language, because there quickly follows a side-splitting enquiry concerning the whereabouts of my handlebars.

The next troop of bicyclists I meet is less of a pain. I overtake them at a steady speed, then a hundred yards later I hit the deep soft sand and come to an inelegant halt. The mother of the group tells me not to mind as I was doing really well before (clearly she's a seasoned judge of off road unicycling). We get chatting. Father and child arrive. I warn the child to keep to one side as riding through the deep sand is too hard. At 6 years old, the boy knows better than an old duffer like me, and rides straight into the sand, sinking almost up to his axles. Parents and unicyclist share a moment of merry laughter.

By now, I've done about 9.5 miles, but I'm more tired than I would be after 20 miles on the flat at 'time trials' speed. Still, I decide to take a look at "The Desert", which is a big area of sand, mud and gravel, much favoured by 4x4 owners, motorcyclists and car thieves.

It's been raining a lot over the last few days, and although the sand has dried out in most of the forest, there must be something different about the water table in the desert area. The track leading under the bridge, over the broken glass, past the burned out car, and under the 6 foot graffito of a penis, is mud and gravel, and water is pouring across the surface, so I'm riding past said obstacles, knowing that a full length UPD will result in a horrible combination of lacerations, soot stains and soaking with muddy water. Fortunately, I stay on top.



I decide not to ride the main part of the Desert anyway. I can hear what sounds suspiciously like an unroadworthy car being driven by someone who may not be the legally Registered Keeper, and being cheered on by a large group of what I can only describe as nasty rough boys. Do I want to be the first interesting thing to happen to them today? Will they steal my wheel and leave the Coker up on bricks? Will they just steal the Coker, ride it around at high speed, crash it and torch it? More likely, they'll shout abuse at me, give me a good kicking, and steal my watch. So I go the other way.

And whom do I meet? The huge colony of bicyclists, complete with the alpha male with an absent-component fixation. True to form, I UPD in front of some of them, but I keep hold of the handle, remount swiftly and ride on. The alpha male didn't see it happen. Over the next few minutes, riding on wet sand and loose gravel, sweating and straining to keep my balance, I overhaul the whole group. Generally, overtaking them is quite easy because I pick the best route across the firmest ground, and they are too stupid to do this. However, there is a sticky moment when one young girl, brighter than her peers, and destined for greatness, darts across in front of me towards firmer ground.

And when I've overtaken the lot and I'm a few hundred metres ahead? Yep! I UPD. By the time I'm back on, alpha male has shouted, "Yaaahaaahaaaa! He's fell off!"

I'm torn between introducing him to standard grammar, introducing him to the concept of manners, or introducing him to the concept of a Coker suppository, but I decide against all of these and ride away, diverting from the trail at the first opportunity and following a parallel route back to the car which, miraculously, is still there, and not being driven round the Desert by a 13 year old thug.

And the numbers? 12.37 miles (19.9 km) with a riding time of 1:43.21 That's an average speed, excluding stops, of 7.18 mph (11.55 kmh). This was on a Coker with 150 mm cranks, about half a mile of the distance walked (soft sand) and a total journey time including stops of around 2:00 to 2:15. Not fast, but the most physically tiring ride I've had for ages. Fun though.

Go on, you know you want a Coker. :0)

*You know, I remember the old half blind bloke, and I even remember the repulsive family with the stupid alpha male. I could take you to the very place where it happened. Unicycling has given me some very happy memories, but it is only now I'm reading some of the old stories that they are being brought to mind. Writing these stories is almost like keeping a diary.*