

A photograph of a mountain unicyclist in a red jacket and helmet riding on a sandy slope. The rider is in a dynamic pose, leaning forward with one arm raised. The background features a large, light-colored rock formation and a clear blue sky with some clouds.

February 2019

12 Months, 12 Top-Riders, 12 Interviews

by Mad4One

Interview with

Ben Soja

IN 2011, BEN HAD A SERIOUS WRIST INJURY AND HAD TO GIVE UP MANY HOBBIES. BUT, AS HE SAYS ".....INJURIES CAN OFTEN CREATE NEW PERSPECTIVES AND POSSIBILITIES!...". IT WAS TIME FOR A NEW ADVENTURE, THE MOUNTAIN UNICYCLE ... EIGHT YEARS LATER, HE IS STILL RIDING MUNI AT A VERY HIGH LEVEL. BEN SPEAKS ABOUT HIS EXPERIENCE AS MUNI-RIDER IN US, AND TELL US HOW A PASSION CAN FILL YOUR SOUL.

INTERVIEW WITH BEN SOJA



BEN IS ONE OF THE MUNI TOP MOUNTAIN UNICYCLISTS OF EVER. IN 2016 HE WINS THE TITLE OF WORLD CHAMPION IN CROSS COUNTRY, TWO YEARS LATER IN ANSAN HE IS STILL ON THE PODIUM OF THE WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS WITH THE 2ND PLACE IN CYCLOCROSS. HE IS THE FIRST AND SO FAR THE ONLY UNICYCLIST WHO HAS SUCCEEDED IN EVERESTING. TODAY WE MEET HIM

THE RESULTS ACHIEVED

2018 - UNICON XIX

2ND IN CYCLOCROSS

2017 - NORTH AMERICAN CHAMPIONSHIP

1ST IN CROSS COUNTRY, UPHILL, AND CYCLOCROSS

2016 - UNICON XVIII

1ST IN CROSS COUNTRY

2015 - GERMAN CHAMPIONSHIP

1ST IN DOWN HILL & CROSS COUNTRY

2015 - AUSTRIAN CHAMPIONSHIP

1ST IN DOWN HILL & CROSS COUNTRY

2015 - EUROPEAN CHAMPIONSHIP

2ND IN UP HILL & CROSS COUNTRY

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DO YOU THINK THAT OUR SPORT HAS CHANGED IN THE RECENT YEARS? IF YES, WHICH ARE, ACCORDING TO YOU, THE REASONS WHY?

Mountain unicycling (muni) has definitely seen a lot of development in recent years. In terms of competitions, the level is higher than ever before. Downhill has shifted towards riders using very short cranks in order to pedal super fast, no matter how rough the terrain is. In Uphill and Cross Country, some riders have started using clipless pedals. Lots of innovation has happened with handlebar setups. Aside from competitions, it's great to see more muni weekends being organized than ever before. Also, some new ways to ride muni have gained lots of momentum recently, like unipacking (backpacking on a unicycle) or, what I especially enjoy, freewheeling (riding a unicycle with a freewheel hub).

WHAT WOULD YOU TELL TO THE YOUNG RIDERS WHO LOOK AT YOU AS AN EXAMPLE? DO YOU HAVE ANY TIPS FOR THEM?

You have to put the work in! Ride a lot and you will see progress. It helps to work toward a goal, for example, riding a certain trail without any dismounts or mastering a particularly difficult section. Try pushing your limits, but do so in a reasonable way – and always wear proper protection gear. A great motivation can be to connect with the community and ride with others, especially if they are better than you. The most important thing, however, is to make sure you are having fun!

WHICH IS THE COMPETITION YOU ARE MOST PROUD OF?

Since I've won quite a few national and international titles, it's hard to pick a single one. I think I'm just very proud of having been very consistent over the last several years. In competitions, my focus is on performing as well as I possibly can, not necessarily on winning. If I also get a good result, it's just a nice bonus. I think this approach has saved me from lots of frustration and kept me motivated over the years. Nevertheless, the achievements that I'm most proud of don't have anything to do with competitions: being the first and so far only unicyclist to succeed in "Everesting"* and managing to ride ultra-long trails like the Backbone Trail in LA or the Rennsteig in Germany in a single day.



*Everesting: The concept of Everesting is fiendishly simple: Pick any hill, anywhere in the world and ride repeats of it in a single activity until you climb 8,848m – the equivalent height of Mt Everest.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY IN AN ATHLETE'S LIFE?

I'm very thankful that my family has always supported me, even though they sometimes wish I would do less extreme things ;) They have always encouraged me to being active and to follow my interests and hobbies, which greatly contributed to my development as an athlete. Now that I've been living far from home over the last few years, I've been getting most of my support from my girlfriend Tamara. She has helped with the logistics for some of my bigger projects and shot some great photos and videos. Also, friends within and outside the unicycling community have been there for me when I needed them, for example when recovering from injuries, or just for having good time. Speaking of support, mad4one has provided me with some awesome equipment over the past years.

LET'S TALK ABOUT YOUR TRAINING METHOD: DO YOU CONSTANTLY TRAIN ALL OVER THE YEAR OR DO YOU SCHEDULE ALSO NON-TRAINING PERIODS?

There is no off-season for me – I like to ride the whole year. Unicycling is just such an important part of my life that I cannot live without it for too long. That's also a big advantage of living in California, where it's pretty much always nice outside to go for a ride. I try to stay fit all year, but if there is a big project or competition coming up, I train specifically for that for a few months.

DO YOU LISTEN TO MUSIC DURING TRAINING? IF YES, WHICH IS YOUR FAVORITE SONG?

I almost never listen to music when I'm outside riding muni. I thoroughly enjoy being immersed in nature and music distracts from that feeling. Also, here in California, I don't want to be caught by surprise by a rattlesnake, bear, or mountain lion ;) So, I guess you could say that Cage's 4'33" is my favorite piece of music for the outside! I do enjoy music for my workouts at home though; I'd just put on my favorite albums from some rather obscure sub-genres of metal or jazz.



AND WHAT ABOUT YOUR NEXT GOALS AND DREAMS?

My highest priority right now is to fully recover from the nasty shoulder injury that happened at the end of last year. I deliberately haven't set any goals for this year concerning competitions or projects since that could be to the detriment of my recovery.

CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCES IN US?

It's been amazing! Great weather, beautiful mountains, and tons of trails to ride. I really enjoy exploring new locations to ride, not only in California, but also in other states like Utah or Arizona. Coming from central Europe, the rocky desert terrain feels very exciting and unique – and it's perfect for muni! I also love visiting national parks like Yosemite, Zion, or Grand Canyon. Concerning the unicycle community, it is a bit different compared to Europe. There is no racing scene, which I miss a bit, but the various muni weekends make up for it. Therefore, my focus has shifted quite a bit, from competitions to road trips, exploring nature, and other fun challenges.

EUROPE, FAR-EAST, NOW THE UNITED STATES, IS MUNI THE SAME EVERYWHERE? WHAT MAKES IT ALWAYS A NEW, EXCITING CHALLENGE?

I'm always very curious how it is to ride in different parts of the world. It's always different – the rocks, the soil, the plants, the climate – and that makes it so exciting. As a scientist, I get to attend conferences all over the world, from Svalbard to Tasmania, and I always use the chance to bring my unicycle. Exploring unknown terrain on my unicycle is one of my favorite things to do!

YOU HAVE PARTICIPATED IN SEVERAL MUNI CHAMPIONSHIPS, YOU ARE ACTIVE IN THE UNICYCLING COMMUNITY, IN SHORT, AN EXPERIENCE FROM DIFFERENT POINTS OF VIEW. ACCORDING TO YOUR OPINION WHAT COULD HELP THIS SPORT GROW?

I believe it would help to have dedicated muni world championships, independent from Unicon and taking place every year. Events with all unicycling disciplines like Unicons or continental championships are sometimes at locations that are not very suitable for muni, and the muni races suffer quite a bit in that case. Better muni locations would allow the riders to demonstrate their full potential. In the future, I would also love to see a freeride competition like Red Bull Rampage for unicycles. This would be great for riders who have been pushing the boundaries in that respect and would generate more publicity for the sport. In terms of equipment, I would love to see a hub with more gears than the two of the Schlumpf hub!



DO YOU PRACTICE ONLY UNICYCLE OR IS THERE IN YOUR LIFE ROOM FOR OTHER ACTIVITIES?

I spend so much time riding muni because it is just so versatile. I can go fast on smooth cross country trails with my geared unicycle, work on my technical skills on difficult downhills, or just cruise down the hill on my freewheel unicycle. When I'm not on one of my munis, I go running, hiking, slacklining, do yoga or a workout. Right now, I also spend lots of time on physical therapy. Spending quality time with Tamara is very important for me too.



ONCE MICHAEL JORDAN SAID: "NEVER SAY NEVER BECAUSE LIMITS, LIKE FEARS, ARE OFTEN JUST AN ILLUSION." IS HE RIGHT, OR IS SIMPLY A NO-LIMIT APPROACH TO LIFE?

I like that he said "often", because there are certain physical limits, which would be nonsense to ignore. For example, unicyclists will never be able to clear a 70 ft gap like some mountain bikers can do. On the other hand, there are definitely also perceived limits that can hinder your progress. When I prepared for Everesting, I had no clue if it would be possible on a unicycle since nobody had done it before. But like Mr.

Jordan, I told myself "never say never" and it worked out!

IN THE LAST YEAR YOU HAD A SERIOUS INJURY AND HAD TO STOP UNICYCLING. WHAT DID YOU DO IN THIS TIME AND DID YOU MISS UNICYCLING A LOT?

This shoulder injury is definitely the worst I've had so far. It happened after being free of injury for four years straight so I'm not complaining. My bones have healed by now, but I still need to work very hard on getting back the full range of motion and strength in my shoulder. It is a long process that takes a lot of patience. Thankfully, I can already ride most of my favorite trails again, although I still need to be careful. Right after the injury, I definitely missed riding the unicycle, but I was never demotivated or frustrated. It's never worth to be angry or sad about what happened since you cannot change it. I also distracted myself by picking up a new challenge – learning to solve the Rubik's Cube as fast as possible, which has been quite fun.

WHAT WOULD YOU ADVISE OTHER ATHLETES WHO, AGAINST THEIR WILL, MUST STOP TRAINING AND RIDING DUE TO AN INJURY?

Injuries can often create new perspectives and possibilities! I started riding muni because a wrist injury kept me from rock climbing and mountain biking for quite a while. It turned out that unicycling was so much fun that I stuck with it. With all the great unicycle-related experiences I've had over the last few years, I would not change anything!



BEN, THANK YOU FOR THE TIME YOU DEVOTED OURSELVES. IT WAS REALLY INTERESTING TO TALK WITH YOU ABOUT YOUR "UNICYCLING" EXPERIENCES AND TO LEARN ABOUT YOUR APPROACH TO SPORT AND LIFE.

SOMEONE SAID "HEALTH IS NOT EVERYTHING, BUT WITHOUT HEALTH EVERYTHING IS NOTHING", SO GIVE YOURSELF THE TIME AND REST YOU NEED TO RECOVER WELL AND KNOW THAT YOU'RE SURROUNDED BY CARING THOUGHTS AND HEARTFELT WISHES.

OUR NEXT RENDEZ-VOUS IS WITH ONE OF THE GREATEST URBAN RIDERS, PIERRE STURNY, ONE OF THE BEST EXAMPLES OF HIGHEST VERSATILITY AND GREAT TALENT.