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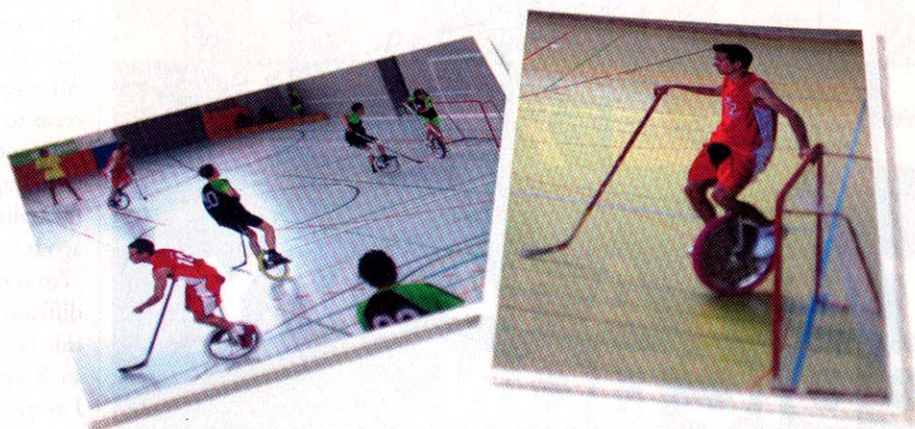
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## Alternative Hong Kong Sports

*If skidding around on a unicycle isn't for you, try participating in or watching one of these activities.*

Visit the venerable **Hong Kong Cricket Club** for a couple of hours of mystifying (to Americans) cricket, or check your 2007 calendar for the fifth day of the fifth lunar month (AKA June 19), when Hong Kong gears up for **colorful dragon boat races**. And, straight from the offbeat zone, suit up with expats and locals for a round of **ice hockey** in a tiny rink in a Hong Kong mall.



## One-Wheel Wonders

In Asia, feisty athletes suit up, mount up, and pedal to victory, or not, in competitions that are part NHL, part Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey Circus. It's unicycle hockey, and it's spreading to Europe. Is America next? / By Judith Ritter / Photography by Matthias Gauler

IT'S A STEAMY NIGHT IN HONG KONG, AND the daredevil players of what has to be one of the world's wackier sports—unicycle hockey—are skidding around an asphalt playground, chrome wheels flashing, wooden sticks smacking wildly at what looks like a tennis ball. This is madness for sure, not only because the thermometer has hit 85 degrees Fahrenheit, it's monsoon season, and bursts of rain are soaking the already sweat-drenched players, but also because the scene is simply improbable. Unicycles are for clowns; hockey sticks are for testosterone-driven young men from the northern countries.

NHL, meet Ringling Bros. Cult status may have eluded this game at one time, but not anymore. The hybrid sport is growing worldwide. This past summer, 40 unicycle hockey teams from more than a dozen countries such as the U.S., Australia, Japan, and the UK tested their mettle in a world competition in Switzerland where gold went to the Swiss home team, the reigning world champions.

The goal of the game, which seems to have first been played in an organized way in the early 1980s, is simple: Teams of five players precariously balanced on uniwheelers pedal wildly, wooden sticks in hand, and try to rocket a tennis or street hockey ball into one of the nets at each end of a court (in this case an off-hours playground enclosed by a chainlink fence between two busy streets). "Just like hockey, but no

contact," explains Joachim Muehlmeier, a lanky German expat businessman, during a water break. "The kind of contact that happens in ice hockey is strictly forbidden," he continues. "If you ride into someone in this game or even give them a shoulder, they just fall right over."

Muehlmeier, who falls over less often than some of his neophyte teammates, has been playing the game for 17 years and is reputed to be a hockey honcho and one of the most sought-after players in Asia. Not all the players on the Hong Kong team are at his skill level or his age. There are men, women, teens, and even children on the team. K.T. Luk is the patriarch of a whole family who plays, including his wife and two children. Elaine Tsao, a surprisingly articulate 14-year-old and recent transplant from California, says that

riding the unicycle was a great way to make friends in a new school and that after the initial jaw-dropping, the other kids got curious. Elaine's mother has just started riding ►

**Unicycle hockey isn't the sexiest sport. When it's not looking dangerous, it does look a little silly, but it is more than a clown sport.**





too. This is typical of a sport that is as egalitarian as it is loony-looking. Unicycle hockey has a surprisingly broad appeal. It has caught the fancy of Jenny Ma, the unicycle hockey version of a soccer mom. After several years of bringing her two teens to practice, a shortage of players was her good luck. One of the team regulars encouraged Ma to take a shoot-to-score mentality. She did just that a few years ago but remains modest about her skills. "I'm not a good player, and this is a difficult game," she says. "You have to ride fast and at the same time hold the stick, approach the ball, and try to hit it. I'm still afraid of falling down, so I must be careful; if I get hurt, I can't go to work."

And work is what Hong Kong is about. Well, isn't it? Not for Martin Turner, at least since he discovered the joys of the game. "Work takes second place to unicycle hockey in my life," says Turner, a Brit who has been playing on the Hong Kong team for four years. But don't get Turner wrong. He loves his marketing job. The problem is, there's something just short of transcendent about this sport, which keeps him coming out for practice every Monday night, rain or shine. "The whole process is enjoyable. Every moment, every 10 minutes, every half-hour is enjoyable," he says, patting the seat of his unicycle the way a jockey might stroke his winning steed. "As you practice, you feel yourself becoming slightly steadier on the unicycle, or going further, or controlling a turn, or going backward. It's a great pleasure."

Yes, players *do* ride backward. And sometimes they skid or fall off, and then hop back on, and resume the chase. Unihockey jockeys can ride dangerously fast, leaning sideways almost parallel to the ground in pursuit of the elusive ball, and there are frequent collisions. In spite of the inherent dangers, Turner calls unicycle hockey "a gentle game" compared with its sibling on ice, but although high-sticking, body-checking, or poking the stick in someone's wheel is verboten and the sport doesn't generate the Neanderthal fervor of ice hockey, if you like a blood sport, you've got it ... at least when it comes to learning the basics, according to David Palmer, an expat from the U.S. "I did

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have bruises, black and blues, edemas, cuts, blood spurting here and there just from trying to learn the unicycle," he says. Palmer, a quiet university librarian by day and unicycle hockey warrior by night, has been playing for only six months. He says the hardest thing about the sport is balance. And indeed, how the players precariously balance and swing at the ball defies the imagination. Palmer says it's not that difficult to stay balanced when the unicycle is in motion, but, he continues, "Try staying balanced making sharp turns and riding backward. That's the challenge."

Palmer not only has had to overcome his physical wounds; like all the Hong Kong players in this strange sport, he's had to surmount a bigger challenge: being a unicycle hockey player in conservative, work-driven Hong Kong, which means dealing with the raised eyebrows of bosses and business colleagues. "The people I work with thought that to ride a unicycle I wore long clown shoes and a big, red nose," says Palmer, chuckling. Unicycle hockey isn't the sexiest sport, and, truth be told, when it's not looking dangerous, it does look a little silly.

Though a few stop to watch the melee on Monday nights, most passersby scratch their heads and giggle a bit when they see players in the battle for balance and goals at Kings Road Playground. But these athletes are undaunted and unscathed by the comments and the looks. The players who come out in Hong Kong and in the dozen or so other countries where the game is played are passionate about their most-unusual pastime, and they are out to show the world that unicycle hockey is more than a clown sport. The feisty uni-wheeler team from Hong Kong, not quite as slick as Singapore or as powerful as Switzerland and Germany, passed up the 2006 world games, but look for the team's wheels on fire in the next world championship, to be held in Denmark in 2008. ■

**Judith Ritter** has contributed to the Boston Globe, the National Post, and the Globe and Mail, and her stories have aired on National Public Radio, Public Radio International, and World Vision Report.

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