

➤ DIFFICULTY RATING SYSTEMS: THE U-SYSTEM

Many sports — especially those where the majority of athletes don't compete — use a rating system to measure difficulty. A great example is rock climbing, where difficulty rating systems form a central part of the activity and are used to measure personal skill level, describe routes, and to illustrate the historic progression of the sport. In climbing the merits of these rating systems have been debated for decades but there is little doubt that they work well to communicate standards within the sport, especially outside of competition. Without a difficulty rating system, you can say that someone won a competition at some time or place, but you have no objective criteria to compare, for example, how hard your local trials lines are compared to lines in a different country, or to what has been done in the past.

In unicycling, the International Unicycling Federation defines skill levels to rate the difficulty of particular riding tricks (search for "IUF Skill Levels" at www.iufinc.org/). This approach works well for tricks and specific techniques because the only variable is the difficulty of the technique itself. In contrast, difficulty in muni and trials is controlled by the terrain, which is infinitely variable and hard to describe. For these riding styles, a system is needed that has a different objective than skill levels: to let riders communicate about difficulty without requiring a description of every possible route.

In North America, mountain biking areas often use the same simple rating system as skiing: green circle (beginner), blue square (intermediate), black diamond (difficult) and double black diamond (experts only). These ratings consider only technical difficulty; endurance doesn't figure into the rat-

ing whatsoever. However, but combined with other factors such as length and vertical gain, it gives riders a useful sense of technical difficulty before they start down a trail.

In trials, the point of the sport is pure technical difficulty, so it makes sense to have a more detailed rating system. In 2001, I published "The U-system" to rate trials difficulty, based loosely on a rock climbing (bouldering) rating system, the North American V-system. In both systems, riders get a sense for a particular degree of difficulty through comparison to routes with established grades.

Unlike rock climbing, unicycle trials doesn't usually have established areas with permanent, rated obstacles, so it's harder to establish and gain familiarity with a particular grade level. However, we can come up with descriptions of standard reference obstacles that most riders should know from experience. By becoming experienced with how hard it feels to ride these reference obstacles, a rider can get a feeling for the effort required to succeed at a particular level. In this way, an unlimited number of problems can be graded for difficulty without having to describe all of them. For example, an obstacle might feel U3 in difficulty, compared to the other established U3 obstacles the rider has done.

The International Unicycling Federation (IUF) unicycle trials rules describe the U-system along with reference obstacles. However, because the U-system is open-ended and the sport is changing quickly, I haven't included description of reference obstacles here. To check out descriptions of reference obstacles, see the link at www.krisholm.com/u-system.



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