



Handcycling: from Recreation to Racing

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Image courtesy of Dr Paul M. Smith

In recent years handcycling has greatly developed as part of the cycling world – instead of propelling a set of cranks with your legs you use your arms. Handcycling was introduced to the Paralympic Games in Athens 2004 and a number of men's and women's races form part of the busy cycling schedule planned for Beijing 2008. Although this sport clearly accommodates the involvement of disabled competitors it is important to note that it is widely viewed as a sport for all; indeed, within the European Circuit of Handcycle races several able-bodied athletes regularly compete for the spoils in an open classification.

For disabled people involved in International Paralympic Committee-sanctioned events, competitors are categorised according to the nature and severity of their disability. Individuals with a high spinal injury (usually a complete lesion

at or above C7/C8), where the functionality of all four limbs is affected, are classified as Handcycling (HC) Division A (HC-A) competitors. Individuals with a mid-level spinal injury are classified HC-B and those with a low spinal injury and/or some other form of lower extremity disability (e.g. one or more amputations) are generally classified HC-C. More detailed information relating to handcycling classification can be found on the British Paralympic Association website.

Handcycling races take place on the road and, typically, have one of three formats. A conventional road race requires the athletes to go as quickly as possible from the start to the finish of a set route. An individual time-trial requires the athletes to race alone and complete a prescribed distance as quickly as possible. Alternatively, the aim of a mass-start criterium event is for the competitors to complete as many laps of a designated course as possible in the time stipulated.



The starting line at a handcycling race, Pall Mall, London, UK. Image courtesy of Dr Paul M. Smith

Criterion races usually take place within towns and cities or within the confines of a park or purpose-built race circuit. In all of the formats men and women race separately and compete in the Divisions mentioned above. The athletic achievements of handcyclists are very impressive; the world's best time for a full marathon by a man is 1:07:18 and 1:13:15 for a woman. In a less conventional feat, September 2005 saw a team of six riders attempted to break the 24-hour World Handcycling record. The attempt took place in the Netherlands and three of the riders managed to complete a staggering 462.2 km (~287 miles in old money) which shattered the previous best distance of 411 km. It should also be mentioned that Rachel Morris, a handcyclist from the UK, is the current women's double World Champion in Division B (road race and individual time trial).

Although the physical achievements of elite handcyclists are very impressive you do

not have to possess World or Paralympic potential to experience and become involved in handcycling. The Handcycling Association (HandcyclingUK; <http://www.handcyclinguk.org.uk/>) is a national organisation responsible for the development and promotion of the sport in the UK. Testimonials from a number of our current members confirm that handcycling, as a competitive or recreational pursuit, is liberating, fast, exciting, sociable and, above all else, is good for your health and an ideal way to develop and sustain cardiovascular fitness without incurring painful and debilitating overuse injuries. Recreational handcycling, using a third wheel and chain set which attaches to a rigid wheelchair, is an important social activity and is especially valuable for youngsters and families with a disabled member. The additional wheel raises the wheelchair castors off the floor allowing the handcyclist to go places that were previously inaccessible - such as country tracks and across cobbles and grass, the chair also travels faster and has the added advantage of gears and brakes.



A handcycling race in progress going past Buckingham Palace, London, UK. Image courtesy of Dr Paul M. Smith

There are a number of ways in which you can get a taste of handcycling. Throughout the year there are several opportunities to train with other members of HandcyclingUK at the Stoke Mandeville Sports Stadium at Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire. Dates for training sessions are typically set in April, June, and September and there are usually several spare handbikes that can be used by novices or beginners with an interest in the sport.

In addition, a number of local initiatives and handcycling clubs are currently being developed throughout the UK; at present such projects are located in Sussex, Kent, Dorset, Stoke-on-Trent, and South Wales. For more information about these opportunities, or become a member of HandcyclingUK for only £10 per year contact Barry North, Chair of HandcyclingUK (handcycling@calshot.demon.co.uk).



Peter Harrison Centre
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