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The Mountains Are Not IN the Way— They ARE the Way

By Peter Telep
UCF Forum columnist
Wednesday, October 30, 2019

If you want to get back into shape but find yourself staring up at that impossible mountain, don't go it alone. We are stronger together.



“Come with me to spin class,” my wife said.

I glanced up from my beer. “Are you crazy?”

To be honest, I wasn't sure what she was talking about. Spin class? I envisioned myself standing on a Frisbee-like disc and twisting back and forth to some silly dance music while muscleheads across the gym pointed and laughed at me. I had just turned 40 and was so stubborn and dense that I didn't realize a spin class involved bicycles.

The thought of riding a bike had me flashing back to my childhood home in Long Island, New York. I could see it clearly: my old Schwinn Stingray with its banana seat and Tom Seaver baseball card held by a clothespin onto the chainstay so it could flap through the spokes. Those were the glory days of jumping wooden ramps supported by cinder blocks, the days without helmets when we used leaves as Band-Aids if we hit the deck.

Spin class? Maybe I can do that. I slipped into the cycle room and sat with my wife in the back row of over 30 stationary bikes arranged in two semicircles behind a raised platform from where the instructor's bike faced the group. Behind this stage, an exotic desert mural spread across the walls and depicted a lone highway wandering toward distant mountains. As the class began, the lights went out, and black lights were switched on. The entire desert mural glowed in the dark, and the cacti and road stripes seemed alien and dreamlike.

Wow, this was cool, and even better, we were riding in the dark so no one could see me! However, that didn't change the fact that it'd been years since I'd done any exercise beyond mowing the grass. I might die in that glowing desert.

Lisa, our instructor, was about our age, and I was thrilled that her song list included hits from Bon Jovi, Aerosmith, Journey, and AC/DC. The music made me begin to forget about the pain, and even though my butt went numb during that first class, I thought, I can do this, and maybe I can lose a few pounds.

In the weeks that followed, I told Lisa how much I liked the class and the music, and she began asking me for song suggestions. During that first year I made dozens of song lists for her, and she began showing me how she adopted the music into a "class profile" with mountains, flat roads, sprints and jumping songs. By the end of the year, I had dropped 20 pounds and Lisa was urging me to become a cycle instructor myself. I received my cycle certification in November 2004. I went from poking fun at gym rats to becoming one myself.

I've worked with thousands of riders of every fitness level, from desk-saddled executives to state champion bike racers.

I've been a cycle instructor for over 15 years now. I've worked with thousands of riders of every fitness level, from desk-saddled executives to state champion bike racers. I've worked with kids as young as 12 or 13 to riders in their 70s.

Being here in Florida, I've worked with people from all over the world—and yet the simulated mountains we're about to climb do not discriminate. They loom before us, challenging us to get out of our comfort zones and return home to our birthplace. I tell my riders that yes, they were born in the mountains and have climbing in their DNA.

The mountains are not *in* the way—they ARE the way. And as a team, we climb them together. No one gets left behind.

To paraphrase President John F. Kennedy, we climb the mountains not because they are easy...but because they are hard, and it's the journey that improves our bodies, our minds, and our souls.

A mountain of research (hello, you lovely pun) suggests that working out with a group inspires you to go harder, feel more accountable, and reap greater rewards. As you climb the mountain, you make a promise that you will not let down your teammates. What's more, I remind my riders that we're not just here for ourselves, but also for our friends and family. They need us, and we push harder for them. We can *do* more. We can *be* more. We can reach the summit. Together.

If you want to get back into shape but find yourself staring up at that impossible mountain, don't go it alone. We are stronger together. And even if cycling is not your thing, get out there, find a partner or a team, take a group fitness class, and begin your ascent toward feeling better. The view from up here is spectacular.

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