

Teaching Effective Beginner Classes

John Macgowan: Exactly. Hi, and welcome to the indoor cycle instructor podcast, and I'm speaking with Gene Nacey with Cycling Fusion and we are talking about how he was described as the patron saint of beginner riders. Gene, welcome, how are you?

Gene Nacey: Thanks John, it's a pleasure to be here again.

John Macgowan: I recognize a difficulty in me and I tend to transpose it to every - or a large number of listeners that sometimes I might not have the patience or maybe empathy, is it the right word to use...



Gene Nacey: Mm-hmm.

Johan Macgowan: ...for coaching brand new beginners, you know, I just like to have a conversation with you just to kind of understand your mindset and some of the strategies or processors, whatever you want to describe it, you know, to effectively engage with new students so that they become intermediates.

Gene Nacey: Right. And they feel engaged in the class and not sort of second class citizens, something like that?

John Macgowan: Exactly, exactly. Yeah and I'd... go ahead.

Gene Nacey: I definitely know the tendency to want to push, you know, everyone along because actually, it's - we tend to want to pull people in to what we are doing. So if we are at a certain level and you know we're riding hard and we want people to come along with, but especially in an environment where there is multiple levels which is often the case with indoor cycling, it's hard for everyone to come along with, because they are just, especially if they are just starting.

And when I first opened my own club, I had a lot of them come to me and say, you know, "I've taken, spending once and I'll never do it again" or "I thought I was going to die" or things like, "I was sore for a week" and so it really, it opened my eyes, because I was really unaware that this was sort of going on, because these people they fade away and then you don't know that that happened.

John Macgowan: Right. Yeah, they are and then they are gone and you are right.

Gene Nacey: And you don't know why, so – and in fact if I don't - you might not even know they were a beginner because you did the setup on them and they were just happy, but you didn't have time to get into the history of their experience and so forth, so it's easy to miss those people.

John Macgowan: Right. And just let me interrupt you real quick, another instructor said something to a new student years ago that I've kind of co-opted because it was just profound and what she was telling this person is, the most important class you would ever take will be the next one.

Gene Nacey: Oh! Interesting.

John Macgowan: With the idea that yes, they are - tomorrow you may not want to come back to what you did today and it's important to fight through that.

Gene Nacey: Right, right. There's definitely always going to be some of that, but anyway I think that, you know, even to be able to say that to someone, you sort of have to know that they exist, that they are for the first time. So I guess I became a little, I don't want to say hypersensitive, but you know pretty aware of who is in the class and who is new and I always made a point to ask them, you know, if they've done this before ever or maybe once and do they ride outside, those questions alone, they only take a few seconds gives me a picture on sort of where they would be. If they don't ride outside and they've never done this before or have only done it once, I have a beginner on my hands and I'm going to treat that person or I'm going to give a little extra attention to that person in terms of how often they are a part of the saddle or how long they try to stay a part of the saddle or how - if I see them fidgeting a lot in their seat and I know you've seen that, right, where they just, they can never get comfortable you know what's going on, they are sore already.

John Macgowan: Because they have their running shorts on it.

Gene Nacey: Right, right. There is no...

John Macgowan: Or tights.

Gene Nacey: They are totally taken by surprise that it's uncomfortable, they didn't even think that the saddle was going to be uncomfortable and I've even seen that in the warm up, I said, "Okay, we're in for a long class if you are already uncomfortable and this is just the warm up." So I think that's given me sort of a penchant towards working them and so we do have beginner classes that are only 30 minutes and we stand for 10 seconds and 15 seconds at a time, but when they do come into the harder classes, because they will, because the time, you know, the time doesn't work for the beginner class and we don't have a lot of them and so they will find their way to the advanced to intermediate classes and so I'll just, you know, I would advise them that it's okay to sit down before everyone else sits down, that they may have to take, you know, posture

breaks that they need to recognize that it's going to take a while for them to get there, in other words just make them feel not so out of it, so to speak.

John Macgowan: And that it's natural.

Gene Nacey: Right. That it's natural, that's the big thing. They don't want to feel - you don't want them to go away feeling like "This is just not for me, I can never handle it." They don't know everyone else went through the same thing. And so, to your friend's point, your most important class is the next one is you want to somehow lay a foundation to encourage them. You've got to come back or you've got to come back expecting that this is going to be a process, that you are not going to get used to it immediately, that it's not – you're not going to nail this in the first three times out. So I think that goes a long way with just sort of setting the stage and it also allows them to feel like you understand that you are not just, you know, teaching the advanced students that you have an interest to see them come along.

So we make a point to do that and I do encourage them also after the class, if I get a chance and I can go up to them and talk to them afterwards. I ask them how did it feel that, you know, out of the saddle, how does your butt feel now because you might be a little sore even more tomorrow and I encourage them to look for the shorter classes to start with, if they can just reduce their time even - sometimes it's only a week, a week or two depending on the person and then they can move into the longer classes.

On the other hand, I've had some folks that stayed in the 30-minute classes for two to three months, they - it was like the perfect amount of time for them even though they got stronger they liked that amount of time, so...

John Macgowan: Well, and then people have scheduling issues and coming to class, so you are better to get them for something than not at all, because it doesn't fit.

Gene Nacey: Exactly, exactly, so you know, so I'll in fact in some cases, I've told - when someone told me, I just can't handle it, you know, after so long, but I can only get here in the evening and you don't have these, you know, some of the beginner classes, a lot of them we didn't during the day. And so I said look it is okay if you don't want to be obvious that, that you are leaving early, take a bike in the back, go for half an hour, 40 minutes, whatever you feel is comfortable and then just cool down on your own and leave, it's okay.

And once they know that's okay and they have seen a couple of others do it and if I get off the bike, which I do occasionally, I'll just make it okay for them to feel like they can do that, because by and large most people aren't going to do it just to get out of the work, so to speak. They want to be there, they want to work out, they want to get there or they wouldn't have made the effort to get there, but you don't want them to have a negative incentive, you don't want them to have a negative experience so that they don't come back.

John Macgowan: Right, or have them have a what they perceive is, you know, unachievable goal of when they're going for 60 minutes, so I'm not going to even try.

Gene Nacey: Right. And that could be one of the biggest motivator – demotivators, this feeling like, you're just never going to get there and that's one of the reasons that we try to make them understand that it, if it was that easy, you know, would everybody really be doing it? It has to be challenging, it's going to take you a lot to get there and they once they feel that that's normal, it does make a big difference.

John Macgowan: Special populations?

Gene Nacey: Well, I would say I hate to pull age card, but there is definitely a correlation between the age of someone and how either long they can go on the bike or how hard and I'm talking typically in the 60 years and up and I get my fair share I would say from mid-50s to probably early 70s and the older that population is, if they ride outside, it's a little different, they are used to the saddle, they know how to control more, how to control their effort. So they've already made friends with the whole intensity aspect of their workout, but if they haven't and they're looking for a different way to say get some cardio and indoors and for whatever reason, say, either running or the step aerobics doesn't work for them, they need some guidance when it comes to cycling and they are not going to last quite as long and so I've seen a definite trend in the older population for how long they can last in the saddle and how long they can last standing.

And what I – the biggest advice I give them especially when they are in mixed classes is, to first start by the number of seconds and come up for 10 seconds and then 15, by the end of the class, hopefully you get to 20 or 30 seconds and let that be sort of your progression for maybe it's a week or more, then start at 20 seconds or 30 seconds, get yourself up to a minute and literally build yourself up till you could stand out of the saddle for maybe two minutes or more. Once you feel you have that, then start to increase the resistance. So now you've been standing at a certain resistance level or if it's a Keiser bike it would have a gear number, so now start to do the same amount of time at a higher gear number.

And so, you've given them a way to self-regulate, you know, while regular teaching is going on so that they can sort of put their personal effort, guidelines around their own personal effort without it being obvious that they are doing something different.

John Macgowan: You know, I like that because, you know, I'm just thinking through myself, what do I do and I tend to say well - tell someone okay, where your objective here is just to get through the class, but I don't give them any metrics.

Gene Nacey: Specific, yeah, specific...

John Macgowan: Right, that - to help them feel like they've achieved rather than suffer and just get to the end of it.

Gene Nacey: Right. And, well, that really came out of - when we have a dedicated beginner class, a 30-minute class, it's nice because we take everybody along that journey together, we all stand for 10 and then we stand for 20 and so that's how that led to being able to throw that in on some of the advance classes, when I see some of the beginners or some new people come in, so it was by sort of being forced to focus on that one population that helped to bring out some of the details.

John Macgowan: Got it.

Gene Nacey: It does work and it's like anything, you know, any exercise routine of any discipline, the progressive nature usually works the best. It's how the body and the mind adjusts to the new routine.

John Macgowan: Interesting. Tom made the comment that you are one that tends to lead from behind.

Gene Nacey: Yeah, that's sort of one of our philosophies that does sort of I guess give extra - I'm not going to say extra attention, but that probably is the right - or consideration, the extra consideration to the beginner and that is so I am in a - let's say I'm in a beginner class, it's a 30-minute class and I've seen the same people in that class for maybe two or three weeks. I see them getting stronger, so as a group we're not starting at 10 or 15 seconds now because I know these four or five or they might be eight people, so we're starting at 30 seconds and we're working up to a minute and a half, but now a new person comes in and because they've been invited by the others that, "Hey, this is a great way, we are slowly getting better and it's - it doesn't - we don't feel like we're dying and all that." So you have a new person come in.

So when we stand what would have been to begin with for 30 seconds, I will stand for 10 and then I will sit and I'll ask those that have been there, if you are comfortable, go ahead and keep standing, but I'm going to sit right now because this is the right amount. So I'm leading, but I'm doing the lower amount work so that others that feel like they can only do the lower amount of work feel that they are doing the right thing. They are following the leader. The others then that are standing, they feel like they are exceeding the expectations, they are doing even better than they are supposed to.

So everybody feels good. People that just came in are doing the right thing and the people that have been there for a while are doing more than as expected rather than it be flip-flopped where you know the beginner feels like they just can't keep up and the regulars are just keeping up, understand what I mean.

John Macgowan: Right, interesting. Oh! Yeah, yeah, no, I - as you were saying that, I say that makes perfect sense.

Gene Nacey: And so, it's actually, it's hardest for the instructor sometimes, you know, because you get into the class, you want to ride you know, this feels good and you have to board back and sort of stay with the group that's behind.

John Macgowan: Exactly.

Gene Nacey: Lot of time being outside, but that's, if you are taking the new group on, that's what you do, right? You let better riders go ahead, say, "Go ahead, I will catch up" and you pull back and you ride more with the beginners, right?

John Macgowan: Right. And the only way to really ride with the beginner is behind.

Gene Nacey: Yes.

John Macgowan: Because, yes, I wouldn't - I led a of B or C level rides and you tend to - if you trying to sit in front and have them follow you, you tend to ride away from them, because you don't really understand their levels of fitness.

Gene Nacey: Right, or you're feeling really good and you are chatting in, you know, they are like...

John Macgowan: Right, right or you've got one of the group that can, you know, that's a little better or more fit, they are stronger than the others and the two of you ride away from them, yes. And the next thing you know you turn around and they're gone.

Gene Nacey: Right. And they'll feel disenfranchised and that's never the intent. But if you are back there for a while, and this it's true, indoors or outdoors, if you are there for a while and then you say, "I'm going to now do this, I'm going to go catch up with the ones up front" or in an indoor class, sometimes I'll say, "Well, I'm going to stay up a little longer, but I think, some of you should stay in the saddle for a while, because if I've done that all through class then it's okay because they're going to think, all right, I'm going to let the instructor go," you know. And so then, you still have a good feeling amongst everybody and if you are outdoors, it's okay that you are going up because they know that you should spend time with the other folks as well. And so, it's all good, but you've laid that important groundwork early in the class or in the ride.

John Macgowan: Exactly. Well, and again I'm thinking through this as, you know, leading a group ride and just like you described at the very beginning, you know, time is falling back, riding alongside, catch running up, I've always found that there was value for me to go all the way to the back and let all the beginners or the lower level ride feeling like they are in front...

Gene Nacey: Mm-hmm.

John Macgowan: By themselves. And I can remember there are a couple of instances where that whoever is in front decided that they are going to be the leader and you could watch them visually raise their intensity.

Gene Nacey: Yes, right, and just...

John Macgowan: Start to hammer a little bit.

Gene Nacey: Mm-hmm. Yep and feel good about it, you know.

John Macgowan: Exactly, exactly.

Gene Nacey: And take that - that big step that “Hey, let’s pass these guys up here,” and then they feel good that they have passed another group or it doesn’t matter if the group was you know, they were like carrying a trailer with their kit on their...

John Macgowan: You are right, yeah, yeah, yeah, passing anybody.

Gene Nacey: It doesn’t matter...

John Macgowan: Is valuable.

Gene Nacey: If you pass somebody and so yeah, you want them to feel that that they are strong too at their level and yeah letting them lead is really important.

John Macgowan: All right, now from a, I don’t know what you call it, do you get off the bike a lot with the beginners.

Gene Nacey: You mean, outdoors or indoors.

John Macgowan: Indoors, right. We’ll keep the conversation limited to indoors from now on.

Gene Nacey: Yeah, indoors. Okay, I wouldn’t say that I get off a lot, but I probably get off more than I do with the advanced group. You know, the more advanced group are the riders here, you are more familiar with that they are sort of your regulars, they don’t need quite as much individual attention and they understand the cues and so we’re all just, you know, we’re on a ride together. But definitely, the intermediates or the beginners, I get off just to make sure that there isn’t something that they are either embarrassed to say or even if it’s just to slow them down to - if I see them working a little too hard, if I come by, they’ll slow down just to speak to me, right? And I know that will help them just sort of catch their breath again. So, I watch and I play it by year, but I know that some people actually get a little bothered, if you are off the bike too much almost like you are invading their space, so...

John Macgowan: Interesting, okay.

Gene Nacey: I’ve seen people that just want to ride, you know, they don’t want the instructor to come around and I’ll say almost like it draws too much attention to them like, “Oh, you need so much help, I’m going to get off my bike and help you every class,” you know. So at least I’ve run into a couple of situations like that, so I just try to

balance it and...

John Macgowan: I got you, okay, because this is going to roll right into my next question then, these classes, almost by definition are going to be small and what happens when you only have one or two people come to your class, do you set up next to them and ride with them or do you stay in the normal instructor position?

Gene Nacey: You know, unless it's a virtual ride, I always stay in the instructor position and - but I will tailor the ride if it's only a couple people, if I know them, I can - the level then becomes whatever we want to do, because it's just the three of us, you know, so if they are - they could be an advanced beginner or they could be a beginner, beginner. And so I will definitely - I'll have the same game plan because I've already have the class picked out, but how I ride that will be very much a function of where they are in their level so that I get them to push their own envelop a little bit, but not too much. I always want them to push just a little past to where they are comfortable, but not too far past.

John Macgowan: Do virtual rides, DVDs, did those work well for beginner classes or is that too distracting?

Gene Nacey: No, actually I like them for all levels. I do like a beginner to have just obviously probably set up enough proper form that they do at least have an idea of what's going on. So I don't advise them to do their first rides a virtual ride. So I want them now to have just a little bit of idea on proper form plus a lot of beginners can't last and most of our virtuals are an hour. And so when they do want to come to them, again I suggest they, you know, sit in the back if they think that that's going to be too much saddle time and feel free to leave at whatever point they feel that, you know, they've had enough in terms of being in the saddle

So - and that has worked really well. I have people that come to the virtuals because they love the visuals and they leave after like 40 minutes or so and then as they get stronger, they do stay, because they like the experience, but I think we have - the culture I guess at our club is that you can have your own training routine, you can get up and leave in the middle class it's okay. I start most of my classes by telling people, "I know you may, you have your own training plan and so you have my permission to ignore everything I say and stick to your own training plan and if you need to go early that's fine too." So I don't want them to feel like they are prisoners or I don't want to be too dogmatic. I want to respect that if they have a coach or they have - or if they are trying to just slowly work up to something that that it's okay.

John Macgowan: Kind of shifting gears just a little bit, do virtual classes, you know, that are without the instructor, do they have any value for a beginner?

Gene Nacey: Well, what I like about them is - well, and it's - they are directly related to our philosophy and that is, they see the connection between what we're doing indoors and how it relates to outdoors and there isn't a better way to do that but a virtual ride.

We are very committed to explaining when we are doing something indoors, what type of terrain, what type of riding it is, where it's useful outdoors.

For us, indoor cycling, the main purpose of it is to become a better rider outdoors, that's not to say that they are on a lot of other purposes that are as just as valid and just as important, but it just happens to be our sort of mission and so we have that tendency and that philosophy to make sure that we show them how it relates and that this type of training we're doing here, this is the type of terrain you're going to feel almost exactly the same way, your cadence is going to be similar, how your heart feels right now, how your legs feel right now is going to be almost identical.

And so that's why I think it's important for the beginner even if they don't ride outside and I've had, I would say probably maybe 15% or 20% of my beginners that never rode outside and didn't have any intention to ride outside decide they wanted to try it only because we've been always relating it to outside, they're very curious and so we have in the spring, we have some classes that are two indoors, one outdoors and when we go outdoors we do it on a closed track or like a rail to trail where it's not on the road and it's not of course single to single track, so on a kind of hybrid bike, and they experience what it's like and how similar it is and they see - they start to see that these things really do work well together.

John Macgowan: Okay. Maybe, I wasn't using the right terminology. What I was referring to were classes that are without instructors.

Gene Nacey: Oh so...

John Macgowan: That they are just a – no that's fine, no, it made perfect sense what you said, but what I'm thinking about is, you know, those classes that are just video.

Gene Nacey: Right. For a beginner, well again, I think, it's important that they have a proper setup. So I wouldn't want someone to go in there and start riding that wasn't set up by an instructor, because, most injuries are caused by bad bike setup. But, one thing to have a proper setup and at least have one or two classes or more for form.

In fact, because we have beginner classes that are all 30 minutes, none of those beginner classes have virtual rides and we do not have any, un – unlike what we call them digital classes, when you have an instructor teaching or virtual rides without an instructor that just has a coaching track. We don't have any that are 30 minutes. So in a sense, they'd already don't fit the purely beginner mode.

That being said, again because of the time constraints or whatever, a beginner can jump into a virtual ride that does not have an instructor and they need to know they should have gotten advice from the last instructor they had that, you know, if you do jump in an advanced class and it's too long, you should, leave on your own when you need to. All the same advice still applies and depending on what that virtual ride gives them, like some just give a dashboard and they need to understand what that means if

they are going to try to ride by some sort of guidance or structure.

And ours, all of ours have audible coaching tracks. So they're being still led by someone telling them what to do. But if they don't have someone telling them they will want to at least get an idea of what they should do. Now, some will do it just like it's a travel log, you know, just something to watch while they are working out and I think in many people's minds that's what virtual cycling is, it's a good distraction to make the time go fast and personally I disagree having a vested interest in virtual cycling. To me it – the point of it is to draw people in to an experience that's more like outside but for some they still think it's a distraction, they'll just ride and do whatever they want and they won't listen to what the coach says, if it is audible coach and they won't care what's on the screen, because they're just there to just pass the time and sweat a little bit.

John Macgowan: Got it.

Gene Nacey: So, in that case, I guess it's okay because they've reached their own objective, right, you know...

John Macgowan: They came in and did something.

Gene Nacey: They came in, they did something, they sweat, they got to work out, the time went fast and so they have accomplished their objective, that's fine. But I mean if they were there to really get better as a rider, they need to hopefully follow the guidance of an instructor either audibly or with understanding the dashboard.

John Macgowan: Got it, okay. Well, we had about 25 minutes Gene, is there anything else that you'd like to add?

Gene Nacey: I would just encourage people to take those few seconds at the beginning class and find out if anyone is in their class for the first time or has never done spinning before because I still like to visit people's classes when I travel and I travel a lot, and I will come into class, someone that doesn't know me at all, and I often do not hear that question.

So - and I always wonder, what if I'm a rank beginner, they don't know that I'm a rank beginner and here we are in the first 30 seconds, we're already pounding away. So that's just my little tip for the instructors out there is, take those few seconds, find out if someone's brand spanking new and then acknowledge them and think about a few things you might direct to them throughout the class.

John Macgowan: Perfect. Right, well Gene Nacey, Cycling Fusion, hopefully, you've got our instructors well prepared for all the resolutionists that are going to be descending upon us here in the next couple of days, because we're reporting this, the last weekend of the year and so for all of you listening, good luck in 2013. And Gene, again I appreciate your wisdom and guidance.

Gene Nacey: Thanks John, as always, it's a pleasure.