

How I Turned My Indoor Cycling Obsession Into a Legit Side Hustle

Becoming a cycling instructor wasn't nearly as easy as I thought it would be—but it was so worth it.

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Wake up. Go to work. Go home. Sleep. Repeat until I croak.

If you're a 20- or 30-something dissatisfied cubicle-dweller like myself, you're probably no stranger to this repetitive routine. And while it's a gross exaggeration of what an actual day looked like for me roughly a year ago (throw in some bad Tinder dates and nights of binge-drinking, too), for the most part, the monotony is spot-on. While I didn't necessarily dislike my job as an editor for a marketing company, that motivational fire I felt coming out of college five years ago had all but quelled. And whether it's having to listen to a collection of talking heads during meetings that should have been emails, taking the sardine-packed 4 train home during rush hour, or simply feeling uninspired at the end of the day, I knew something in my life needed to change. That is, except one aspect: **indoor cycling**.

With dimmed lights, a throbbing sound system and surging adrenaline, the 45 minutes I spend on a stationary bike inside Crank NYC's **indoor cycling studio** are some of sole times during the week I actually feel inspired, challenged and, most importantly, alive. Of course, that exhilaration usually ceases the second I start receiving emails with the subject line "Urgent!" on my phone after class.

SELF

Aside from the actual physical and mental therapy I'd receive clipped into a bike, it's hard not to take notice of the studio and the instructors themselves. Most have this contagiously upbeat and welcoming aura that follows them from the first song to the final stretch. My perpetually dissatisfied, energy-less would stare at them on the podium (in hindsight, I probably looked like a creep) and yearn for that glow. I mean, I'm one of the best riders in any class I go to—why shouldn't I be able to glow, too?

And so began my quarter-life crisis quest to give my career path 180-degree flip and pursue **becoming a cycling instructor** outside of my full-time job. As gratifying, exciting, and challenging as the whole experience was, I soon found out that the journey would be no cakewalk.

First and foremost: You need to go through a whole process to get certified.

After expressing my interest in becoming an instructor to Crank's lead instructor, Amanda Margusity, I learned that the first step was certification: a \$355, 10-hour day-long course that covers ride profiles, bike set-up and safety, positions, music selection—the content runs the gamut.

The morning of my certification course, I was insanely nervous, expecting trimmed, tanned fitness gurus to fill the classroom seats. The opposite couldn't have been truer. Many of the students were just like me: riders with full-time gigs looking to turn their passion for cycling into an actual job. Another woman worked at a senior center and wanted to craft a beginner ride for elderly folks. One older man showed up in full-on biking gear (helmet and all) because he hoped the certification would give him more credibility as an actual bike rider.

Eight excruciatingly long hours later, I finished the course—but we weren't certified yet. Completion meant you had to pass an online exam. Which I did, but barely—it was a lot more difficult than I expected. Although the online, 80-question exam was “open book,” I didn't necessarily pass with flying colors (I received an 83 percent—and you need an 80 percent to pass).

Then, you need to start learning all the basics—which actually takes a few months.

AWhile I had a little piece of paper I could wave around proclaiming my official status as an **indoor cycling** instructor, I was far from the point where I could actually lead the class—in fact, it took three more months until I was even admitted into a training program. While certification technically means you can start teaching the second you pass your online exam, you'd be hard-pressed to find a studio actually willing to add you to their staff. It's not that Crank required a certain amount of podium time to be hired, it's just that you have to prove you can actually lead an exhilarating, engaging class—not just ride on a stationary bike really well.

Despite my instructor-limbo period, Margusity generously offered me fundamental tips and suggestions each time I'd stalk her after class with questions, and couldn't be more excited to help me progress along my journey.

For starters, I was instructed to sing during my cycling classes, a technique that helps with breath control and speaking over the microphone, in addition to understanding “BPM” and “RPM” (beats per minute and reps per minute, respectively). I started to categorize any and all music I'd hear into the style of workout I'd envision them playing in my profile: a hill, a jog, a sprint, or a climb.

SELF



Courtesy of the author

With no experience, getting a job by solely applying is pretty difficult. I started attending four to five classes a week for the practice, and a couple of months later, began an intense instructor training program.

Margusity suggested that I try to gain some experience at a smaller gym before my actual tryout occurred at Crank, which was still months away at that point. Of course, out of the 10 or so gyms I applied to, I didn't hear back from a single one. It was a frustrating Catch 22—I couldn't gain experience on the podium unless I was hired first, but nobody would hire me. (Not unlike the experience I had trying to get my first job out of college.)

Although I began my journey at Crank as a **ClassPass** member taking one to two sessions per week, I knew that if I wanted the studio to become a permanent part of my life, I'd need to commit myself. After signing up for an unlimited-class membership, I upped my attendance to four or five sessions per week, ensuring I was always in the front row, on beat, and working my butt off. That being said, if you're a fitness newbie who has been eyeing an instructor role, make your interest known to the studio staff and commit to taking classes regularly—and with enthusiasm.

For studios with training programs, be prepared to live in your Lulus (and say goodbye to serious weekend boozing). By the time August rolled around, roughly two months after I completed my certification program, Margusity informed me that the studio would be organizing a training program for new instructors, and that I was admitted. It was the first tangible step toward my new goal that I had attained since I started my journey, and needless to say, I called my mom immediately after in full-on squeal mode. Of course, once the training began, it became apparent that this was no part-time fluff gig—it was an actual career that would take serious work to master.

Throughout August and September, a collection of other instructors-in-training and myself spent upwards of 10 hours each weekend on the bike continuously practicing and learning new techniques and tricks. And while I was no stranger to participating in cycling classes hungover, it's hard to exert yourself physically and mentally while burping out vodka-sodas—meaning that Friday and Saturday boozing sessions were indefinitely put on hold. It also served as a reminder that, despite me seeing cycling instruction as somewhat of a pipe dream, my new aspirations would require a lifestyle change—and commitment to that change, too.

SELF

Training was humbling. Just because you're good at cycling doesn't mean you'll be a good instructor.

As someone supremely confident in her riding ability and endurance (hell, it was one of the reasons I wanted to become an instructor in the first place!) this aspect to my training was slightly hard for me to swallow. But as Margusity would continuously stress to us, actual cycling ability takes a backseat to your presentation and performance.

Our first training session that focused on microphone work was a stark reminder that I was still a total newbie. From creepily breathing too heavily into the mic to repeatedly and annoyingly saying 'woo!' followed by awkward silences, being a leader (as opposed to a follower) in class would require some considerable work on my part.

You'll also assume the role of part-time D.J.

Whether it be weight lifting, running, or a high-intensity interval training class, we're accustomed to choosing and hearing music that motivates and inspires us. Although that's still certainly the case with indoor cycling, the music doesn't just create the ambiance—it dictates the speed and intensity of the ride. That being said, your music choice as an instructor is absolutely critical to your success. In fact, it's one of the most important factors (if not the most important) in your ride.

After chatting with Margusity and a few of the other instructors at Crank, I soon learned that preparation time for each class would probably double (or triple, in the case of newbies) the actual duration of the 45-minute ride. For a newbie instructor like myself, preparation could likely take two hours or more. And it's not just a matter of picking music that fits certain confines of fast or slow, you're creating a "journey." In other words, you can't just load your playlist with the same EDM track—you have to continuously surprise your riders with fresh cadences, styles, and sounds.

Learning a new skill takes time and practice. I'm still not done with the process, but I've learned a lot.

As of right now in late October (nearly five months after I became certified to teach indoor cycling), training still hasn't ended—and I am not an official instructor on the schedule at Crank. And to be completely honest, I prefer it that way. Engaging a packed room full of riders waiting on your next move isn't exactly a natural experience for me, and I'd rather perch on the podium with complete confidence as opposed to blindly winging it.

Of course, that doesn't necessarily mean I haven't grown tremendously as both a rider and as a presenter. The Crank studio now positions two bikes side-by-side on the podium (where there used to be one), and I ride alongside whatever instructor is teaching the class, acting as a teacher's aide of sorts. I help riders on to their bikes and try to keep the class on cue with the music, especially when the instructor leaves his or her bike for whatever reason. I do this as many times per week as I can, which usually adds up to five, six or seven (if I'm really motivated!)



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Ultimately, the long process of going from indoor cycling enthusiast to instructor helped me regain my power.

While I didn't necessarily assume nabbing a part-time job as an indoor cycling instructor would be as easy as, say, becoming a part-time dog-walker, the extent to how time-consuming and strenuous the journey has been from start to finish was surprising. Whether it's the amount of work being put into a single, 45-minute playlist, waking up at the crack of dawn to attend trainings, or staying after class to try to build a following, there is no way I could have made it this far en route to becoming an instructor if I didn't have passion for the sport.

Despite the fact that I'm still not on the schedule, even being associated with an organization that doesn't have a damn thing to do with my daytime job is hugely liberating. Behind my desk, I'm an obedient workhorse, abiding by a politicized hierarchy where who you know trumps what you—a structure anyone in a corporate office can probably relate to. But at Crank, even riding alongside another instructor on the podium, I am in the lead, with 40 faces fixated on my every movement and waiting for my next cue.

I might go as far to say that my journey in becoming an instructor helped me regain a sense of authority and command I was so desperately searching for in my life. As you can probably tell by the fact that I'm conveying this story to you in an article, I'm also a freelance writer. And while that other side hustle gives me an added sense of control in my work, the power I feel clipped into an indoor cycling bike trumps it tenfold.

As I write this, I would love to do nothing more than ditch my daytime gig, pen the next bestselling novel, and craft Spotify playlists for my next cycling rides. Realistically, of course, this probably won't be happening anytime soon, as I live in an exorbitantly expensive city and my cat enjoys gluten-free, vegan wet food. For now, it's a hustle—a gritty, oftentimes tiring venture that could turn into something big if I stay relentless in my pursuit.