



By Laura Warf

Coaching and Communication in GROUP CYCLING

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Creating an effective ride begins with how you communicate with your participants. Make it your job to know what their needs and objectives are combined with what motivates them throughout all types of terrain. Combine this approach with your passion for cycling, an infusion of fun and upbeat music and you've got yourself a winning combination for an unforgettable class.

Teaching versus Coaching

How can we teach and coach all in one session? Let's first identify what the difference is between teaching and coaching since both qualities should be present in all types of classes.

Teaching a class is about transferring a skill of some sort. You are helping participants learn how to do something specific such as learning proper riding technique. Teach-

ing makes up the educational component of a class which could also include proper hand positioning during specific types of terrain (seated flats versus standing climbs).

Coaching a class is about instructing or training an athlete or class participant through the use of components such as setting objectives, establishing a process and then evaluating the results after a pre-determined timeframe to make sure they achieved the set goals.

Setting Objectives

Objectives can be set in three categories: Mental, Physical or Technical. The following are some examples of each within each category relating to cycling:

Mental: visualization, game plan, concentration, relaxation, recovery through effective breathing

Physical: improving cardiovascular endurance, increasing muscular strength, increasing power output, improving general endurance such as completing a 60 minute class or improving specific endurance such as performing better on hills or sprints

Technical: establishing smooth cadence, proper pedaling technique, proper body positioning on the bike, relaxed shoulders and neck, proper breathing technique

Setting Up the Process

Once we have established our objective



Indoor cycling photos courtesy of Nautilus, Inc.

for a particular student or for our class in general, how do we go about achieving it? This is where the process comes in. We can choose any of the aforementioned objectives. Let's keep it simple and use one physical objective like increasing speed as an example. "How can I coach my students to improve their speed within the sprint components of my class?" It is not good enough to simply say "go faster," that is not coaching. They need to know *how* they can go faster. For some people that will mean bringing in other objectives like improving cadence or pedaling technique by using the upstroke – to pull more, for some it may mean developing a stronger aerobic base before moving into higher intensities such as sprint intervals, and for others, developing greater leg strength. All of these objectives could be broken down even more to smaller, more manageable steps with specific time frames that you can teach and work on in each class.

Evaluate Success

The final component to the coaching model is to evaluate the set objective. Did we achieve the goal we set out to improve upon? How do we evaluate the objectives outlined earlier (Mental, Physical, Technical)? A mental objective could be evaluated by a questionnaire of how the athlete or participant feels or by their breathing rate. A physical objective could be evaluated by VO2MAX or recovery heart rate or breathing rhythm. Technically, you could evaluate the improvement of body positioning and cadence through video and overall improved performance.

Teaching the Class

Conducting well-rounded and fun classes requires skills that need to be developed as an instructor. Preparation and practice are keys to success. You are the leader and facilitator responsible for creating a "WOW" experience for all your participants. If you teach group cycling classes, be authentic as a cycling instructor: be fit, be passionate, dress appropriately, ride outdoors to know what it feels like to ride on real terrain, be punctual and well prepared each class with a selection of motivating music to carry participants throughout the ride.

Communicate

Set a game plan ahead of time. Plan how you will communicate your objectives to the class verbally and non-verbally. Verbal communication includes what you say (cues and magic words) and how you say it (voice qualities and tone). It is a good idea to make a list of powerful cues and short descriptive phrases to integrate into your classes. We all get stuck repeating the same words – break the habit! Magic words are ones that will quickly describe to the group what you are looking for. Using our previous example of increasing speed, once we have communicated the objective of improving pedaling technique we could simply say "pull." The group will identify with that word and focus on pulling and using the upstroke to help increase their speed without bouncing on the seat.

Realize that 55 percent of your overall communication occurs non-verbally. It is transmitted through your gestures, facial expressions and overall body language. Participants are looking at you for guidance, for what they should be doing and how they should be feeling (intensity level). Let them know what you are looking for through verbal and non-verbal communication to get the best performance from them each and every drill.

Educate

Include an educational component to each one of your classes. Everybody likes to learn something new. Realize that you make

a positive impact on people's lives each and every time you conduct a class. Explain why things like proper riding technique are important, how to breathe effectively, when and why we should hydrate, why recovery periods are crucial to performance enhancement and making sure participants are making good use of recovery time. Another great opportunity to educate is during the cool down and/or stretching phase of the class. Offer quick fit tips like "be sure to refuel your body within the hour following the class" or briefly mention how certain strength training exercises could improve their positioning or their performance on the bike.

Motivate

Keep in mind, in one class setting you will have a varied group of people with a set of their own needs and goals. Our challenge as instructors is to help them get there by keeping them motivated along the way. Use positive reinforcement throughout the ride. This means you should be praising the effort and not just the result. Use a variety of ways to motivate and encourage participants. Try invoking visualization for a specific race drill by inviting them to imagine all the details that would surround a race day – you are there to guide them through it as their coach. Other components that motivate clients are things like: the positive energy and passion the instructor brings to the class, the choice of music and how it is used to create the ride and overall experience, involving each person by making eye contact and making them feel a part of the team, what you say and how you say it to command focus and commitment, and overall, making it a fun class that people look forward to coming back to.

As an instructor, you are constantly communicating to your group. Take time to prepare each class so that everything you say makes an impact, helps them learn and keeps them motivated. As a result, the retention in your classes will remain high. It is always more fun for you and for participants when the class is full, since everyone helps cultivate the group energy. Evaluate yourself as an instructor and set objectives on how you can continue to improve, learn and grow so that in turn you always have something to give; a world class performance each time. □

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