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TOP LEFT: COURTESY PHOTO; TOP RIGHT: ARTSQUEST—JEFF AUGER

The beachy-keen lobby of the new Moxy hotel in Virginia Beach PAGE 74



Back in the Saddle

How spin class saved my soul—and why I hope you have your own fitness family **BY JACQUELINE MENDELSON**

I could barely even glimpse my black-and-yellow cycling shoes beneath my swollen belly that December morning in 2018. “Mind over matter,” I muttered to myself as I clipped into the bike. Stevie Nicks’ raspy voice began to croon, “Listen to the wind blow, watch the sun rise,” and I settled into the beat. Taking in the sea of familiar faces, my self-judgment began to evaporate. My SoulCycle community—my people. Not only had we sweated, cried and whipped our towels in the air together, we had forged deep connections. Friendships that saw me through my divorce, my remarriage and, now, my soon-to-be firstborn.

I had moved from the West End of Washington, D.C., to Bethesda in the fall of 2015 knowing exactly one person—the boyfriend I would end up marrying. Newly divorced and carless, I had secured a one-bedroom rental that happened to be two blocks from a SoulCycle studio. Little did I know that spinning would bring me back to my field hockey and lacrosse days at boarding school, where my freshman-year teammates became lifelong friends.

One evening after work, I finally strode over to a class. The wide-grinned instructor, Michelle, spoke openly about her family relationships, shared stories about her acting career and told us about a recent date. “You are exactly where you are supposed to be,” she emphasized between songs. “Trust the process, Everyone in this room has gone through something hard.” Instead of fight-

ing back tears, as I had done on and off for months at work, I felt a release as they melded with the sweat dripping down my cheeks.

Over the next several months, SoulCycle became my house of worship, and I came to think of Michelle’s ever-evolving affirmations as thrice-weekly sermons. When I quit my law firm job nearly a year later, I was up to six classes a week and counting. But it wasn’t just Michelle drawing me in.

As I began to rebuild my life after divorce, the faces of strangers had become those of my closest confidantes. Similar to the locker room banter of my boarding school classmates followed by team dinners and training trips, quick chats in the spin studio turned into lunches and dinners. Eventually we found ourselves consoling one another after miscarriages, celebrating birthdays and even vacationing together on the shores of Nantucket. Just as I still do with a close circle of my school teammates.

On the morning of my wedding to that boyfriend-turned-fiancé, we donned our respective bride and groom tees for a celebratory ride. Dripping with sweat afterward, we clinked our Champagne flutes and cut into a cake made by our friend Polly. “I couldn’t help myself,” she said with a grin as she pointed to the custom topper—a pair of bicycles.

After my daughter was born in 2018, I began to mix in yoga

classes as well as stroller walks with fellow parents. Like spinning, heated yoga provided a sanctuary from the pressures of parenting and working, allowing me instead to focus on the simple movements of my body.


But in March 2020, my routine came to an abrupt halt. Like every fitness studio around the country, SoulCycle and CorePower Yoga closed their doors when the pandemic hit. People feared even masked walks outside. For weeks I lamented the loss of my physical and emotional outlets. Would our friendships go by the wayside, too, I wondered?

A small group of us got our act together for a couple of Zoom happy hours—cocktails encouraged. We shared workout playlists and took the occasional masked walk 6 feet apart on the Capital Crescent Trail. Pregnant this time with my second, I even donned a pair of headphones and tried out a few of the silent disco spin classes in the parking lot of the Marriott in North Bethesda.

With fleeting ambitions of practicing downward-facing dog and cycling while my newborn and toddler napped, I jumped at the chance to livestream yoga classes and purchase a spin bike. But zero accountability and the inevitable distraction of my husband and kids made it easy to skip those planned workouts. And those occasions when I managed to lay down my mat or clip in? I had a dark room with a mirror. Music turned up to the loudest decibel. I even had a scented candle. But I didn't have my community. Turns out, that was the key to it all.

Fast forward to January 2023. *Here goes nothing*, I thought as I clipped into a bike at the Bethesda studio. "Welcome back," Michelle said with her signature grin. "Close your eyes," she encouraged me and the many other riders who had recently returned. "Trust that your body knows what to do." Within minutes, I felt my mind and body relax as I moved intuitively to the beat—pushups, tap-backs and all. I gazed around the dark room during the last song, feeling the contagious energy of my fellow riders cheering and whipping their towels in sync. I truly came home at that moment—not simply to the end of the class, but to my fitness family here in Bethesda.

Since then, I've started getting to know the new staff and riders who've flocked in since the pandemic eased, reconnected with old fitness acquaintances and invited my longtime workout buddies over for dinner. Our crew spans five decades. We are lawyers, writers, fitness instructors, publicists, stay-at-home parents and entrepreneurs. But we are united by a collective basic human desire: to connect.

And that's how I remembered that exercise can be about more than simply burning calories, boosting endorphins or dutifully checking a box for the day—though it does all those things, too. It's about moving your body and connecting with the people around you. Whether you're passing the ball to a teammate, riding with the pack or flowing on your mat alongside others, group fitness allows you to feel a part of something larger than yourself, drawing you in at times when you might feel out to sea. I'm back in the saddle these days, and I hope you will be, too. 



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