

Smart Cycle Training

CASE STUDIES

USHA SUNDARAM

Female, 44

University Lecturer, Eaton.

Goals: To learn how to cycle (complete beginner), to get healthier and fitter, to be more independent.

Summary

Usha moved to Norwich in June 2013 and having never learnt how to ride a cycle when she was young, decided to take up lessons. It was partly to get fitter and partly to take up a fresh challenge in a new chapter of her life. She had lessons once or twice a week on a training bike borrowed from Smart Cycle Training before buying her own.

She started learning on the grass in Eaton Park and quickly moved to controlling the bike on pavements and learning to turn. She progressed to riding on residential roads and then, after buying her own bike, started cycling to work. For someone who doubted that she would ever have the balance or co-ordination to ride a bicycle, she now rides most days.

Usha said of the lessons, *"Its genuinely the most transformative thing I've ever done in my life and probably my proudest achievement. It has had such a tremendous impact on so many things in my life. I mean, it's useful from a very functional perspective, I started commuting to work on bicycle every day...so it was that freedom and independence. And I think it had a fantastic effect on my health, I lost a lot of weight...I went back to a time when I felt fit and healthy"*



The following interview was conducted by an independent consultant, James Frost.

James: Why did you want to learn?

Usha: It's just something that I've never done - I'd never learnt how to swim, I'd never learnt how to drive a car, I'd never ridden a cycle.

A lot of it was cultural - I grew up in India and I didn't own a cycle and I didn't have family members or neighbours that I could ask to teach me. So I never got round to it. And although I've lived in this country for twelve years I'd always walked to work or used bus travel or commuted by train.

But moving to Norwich was a new chapter, a new start. It just felt like something I had to do. I wanted a tangible sense of achievement...like I *can* learn something new. I was also trying to get a bit fitter as I hadn't been well over the last couple of years.

Did you have any fears or anxieties?

When I was a child I was never sporty and I always thought I was never really that coordinated so I wasn't sure I would physically be capable of learning a new skill at my age. And mentally, I've always been a self-taught person, in terms of language and education, so I didn't know I could be instructed.

I don't like people talking down to me or treating me like an idiot or yelling at me...which is what happened when I tried to learn how to drive...it would destroy any confidence I had in myself. So because of that I was very scared when it came to getting cycling lessons...but I just wanted to give it a shot.

How did you come across Smart Cycle Training?

I found Matt really quickly, I think I Google'd him. I looked at 'cycling lessons norwich' and his website came up.

He phoned me straight away after I sent the email. I told him then 'if at some point you think I'm unteachable, I want you tell me'. I didn't want to waste anyone's time. I just didn't know if it was possible for someone of my age to learn.

I was very surprised when he said that there were lots of people my age or even older than I was that were learning. And people with similar backgrounds who had never learnt when they were younger who wanted to have a chance now. So that was fantastic to hear.

He said he would bring a training bike and just wanted me to wear comfortable clothing. And it was summer, there wasn't a lot of crowds around, he wanted to meet up in the park...so it minimised the embarrassment factor.

What did you cover in the first lessons?

We started learning on the grass with short distances and him walking behind me. I was wobbling and I was terrified of making a fool myself or coming a cropper...but I kept going.

Then on the second lesson, Matt took me on the pathway. And there were dogs running across, kids running across...and at first I couldn't avoid them so easily. But after a couple of times it just clicked and I was riding round and round the park in circles.

On the third lesson Matt said 'do you have any idea you've done three miles today just going round the park'. I had absolutely no idea!

Did you feel pushed to improve or did it just happen gradually?

At no point in any of the lessons did I feel he was pushing me. He would always say things like 'you have no idea how much you've improved, how much your stamina or balance has improved'. I think he latched on to the fact that I was a self-driven learner so he was able to stand back and let me find my own way. The fact that he provided me with that validation was the motivation in itself.

Were there any moments that you felt unsafe or unsure?

I had one fall and it was a pretty bad fall. It was in the summer and I was struggling in the heat. We were trying to do these S-shapes around these little cones in Eaton Park. I was trying to take a turn but I was more worried about tipping the cycle over so it caused me to wobble a little bit and I fell off. But I just wanted to get on with it...I just got back on and wanted to continue to the lesson. Matt got more upset than I did!

My friends told me to get some arnica so I did. They were all very supportive and said 'it's great you are doing this.' Some of them are cyclists so they understood the importance of what I was doing and told me to keep going.

How long did it take for you to buy your own bike?

Maybe after five or six lessons. Matt was very supportive and gave me his expert opinion...he even visited a bicycle shop and told them about me...so when I went in they already knew who I was.

On the day my new bike was ready for collection Matt met me at the shop and helped me, for the first time, ride that bike all the way back home via Marriot's Way. He guided me because it was the first time I'd ever tackled that distance with traffic...I was so happy.

How would you describe Matt as a teacher?

Patient, he was patient, he had more faith in me than I had in myself. I never knew him to lose patience, never knew him to raise his voice or get frantic. And he had that instinctive understanding to find out how people learn. He often felt I was being too hard on myself and did his best to relax me.

What did you learn in your final lessons?

At some point we moved away from the park onto the road just behind the park to do U-turns, turning left, turning right, turning into a road, out of a road...which I think I picked up pretty quickly. I still remember those lessons - we did spatial awareness, primary position, secondary position, glancing to look at people to make sure they know you are there. Matt would always say there would be a point when you would feel at one with the bike. And around that time I reached that point.

How would you reflect on the lessons now?

It's genuinely the most transformative thing I've ever done in my life and probably my proudest achievement. It has such a tremendous impact on so many things in my life. I mean, it's useful from a very functional perspective - I started commuting to work on bicycle every day and to different parts of the city...so it was that freedom and independence. Six months earlier I would never have thought in a million years I could cycle in traffic.

And I think it had a fantastic effect on my health, I lost a lot of weight. I had been ill for about two and a half years which caused me to gain weight and with the cycling I went back to a time when I felt fit and healthy. You just feel good about yourself...it wasn't about vanity or being slim...it was just about being healthy, being fit and being able to do things that give you energy.

How often and how far are you typically riding now?

These days I'm cycling to and from work every day. And it's the first thing I do if I have to get somewhere - I always look it up on the cycle map...are there any cycle paths? My cycling has progressed so much that I can do steep inclines in my 5th gear and I don't even break a sweat, I'm not even out of breath, which is a tangible sign of how much my fitness has improved.

A lot of people were very surprised that I was cycling all the way through the winter, sometimes in really poor weather. For me, it never occurs to me, it's only rain, it's only water. Matt would always say 'there's no such thing as bad weather, only inappropriate clothing!'