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blog

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From "spin rage" to expiration date drama — cycling studios don't just need good instructors, they also need good lawyers.



[1]

Getty Images
June 09, 2016
by
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SoulCycle has raced into the hearts of the Hollywood elite, but a first-time rider says she was injured because an instructor bullied her, and now the company is facing the latest in a series of lawsuits filed since it was purchased by mega-gym Equinox in 2011.

Carmen Farias is suing SoulCycle and instructor Angela Davis — who is a bit of a celebrity herself — for gross negligence, according to the complaint filed May 31 in L.A. County Superior Court. She says

the lack of instruction, design of the bike, volume of the music and darkness of the room contributed to injuries that continue to cause her physical and mental pain and suffering.

Farias says she decided to give the sport a spin as part of a corporate outing in July 2014. She says she had never been to a spinning class of any kind and, while she had ridden a traditional bicycle before, she had not engaged in a physical fitness regimen for several years. An unnamed employee helped Farias clip into her cycle, but no one ever showed her how it worked or warned her not to get out of the seat while the flywheel was spinning.

As class began, Davis turned the music up and the lights down, so the room “was cast into a shadowy darkness.”

During the ride, Farias could hear instructors “mocking some of the other riders” because they weren’t keeping up with the pace. When her legs began to weaken and she tried to stop pedaling, she says Davis ridiculed her for slowing down and someone — possibly Davis — barked at the riders that, “We don’t take breaks.”

“Carmen was embarrassed that she was being called out in front of her bosses and fellow employees,” states the lawsuit. “The shame caused Carmen to momentarily attempt to pedal faster.”

Farias says she quickly realized she needed to stop, but didn’t know how.

“Fatigue and disorientation overcame Carmen and she fell to her right and off of the saddle of the spinning cycle,” states the complaint. “Although her head and torso were now lying to the right side of the spinning cycle, Carmen’s left and right foot remained locked to the pedals.”

The momentum of the flywheel kept the pedals turning and her left ankle was repeatedly dislocated, she claims, leaving her “catastrophically injured.” She says she completed and signed the new rider waiver form, but left it on her desk at work and any waiver she may have signed while checking in at the Beverly Hills studio in is a violation of public policy and unenforceable because SoulCycle failed to provide her with a copy.

A SoulCycle spokeswoman tells *The Hollywood Reporter* the company does not comment on ongoing litigation.

SoulCycle has a cult following, and Davis is building one of her own. She has more than 41,000 followers on Instagram [2], and A-listers from Lea Michele [3] to Kerry Washington [4] have tweeted their praise of the instructor — oh, and Oprah celebrated her 60th birthday with a spin led by Davis.

Ride baby, ride! Birthday ride at @soulcycle! [5]

A video posted by Oprah (@oprah) on Jan 24, 2014 at 3:07pm PST

But Farias says Davis and her fellow instructors failed to follow SoulCycle’s own policies and procedures, which require a 15-minute introduction to spinning and instruction on how to properly and safely use the bike and what to do in response to fatigue. The lawsuit claims Davis skipped this because it’s a “non-compensated task” — which was an issue in two class-action wage and hour lawsuits [6] against the company.

According to an SEC filing [7], the New York lawsuit was dismissed and the California suit settled. “Without admitting liability, the Company was successful in settling the remaining claims on a single plaintiff basis for an all-inclusive payment (including attorneys’ fees) of \$0.1 million,” states the filing.

SoulCycle is also currently facing a potential class-action lawsuit from customers who are unhappy with its policies regarding the expiration dates on prepaid packages of classes. They claim the series, as they're called, expire too quickly and result in wasted purchases — in violation of state and federal law. SoulCycle has argued that series shouldn't be treated as gift cards because they can't be used to purchase anything, but U.S. District Court Judge George King denied a motion to dismiss [8] on those grounds.

But perhaps the most colorful spinning-centric lawsuit is the one filed against Equinox Holdings, SoulCycle's parent company, stemming from an incident of "spin rage" in 2007.

Stuart Sugarman was spinning along, cheering and shouting things like "You go, girl!" in a Manhattan Equinox gym. Christopher Carter, who was a few bikes down, quickly became agitated. Sugarman claims Carter verbally assaulted him before he dismounted from his bike and in a "spin rage" picked up the front of Sugarman's cycle and threw him into the wall of the classroom, "leaving a hole in the sheetrock where his cycle penetrated."

The *New York Post* described it as a "psycho spin out [9]." Carter was acquitted [10], but Sugarman sued him and the gym, claiming "mental and physical anguish, economic loss, pain and suffering, humiliation and damage to reputation" as a result of the incident.

The judge dismissed the company as a defendant in 2008, but litigation between the two spinners is pending.

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