

Our conversation with Jessica Bratus of fitmi! In Ann Arbor, MI

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JP: We're talking today with Jessica Bratus, at fitmi! In Ann Arbor, and this is an odd business that you have here, in the bicycle world...

Jessica: It is unique...

JP: ...how'd you get into it?

Jess: Yes, so, I cut my teeth at a store named Two Wheel Tango, I worked there for 10 years, and it was a job that..

JP: But why?

Jess: But why!? So, I got into cycling in college, I fell in love with the romantic side of cycling, and bike messenger culture, and single speed bikes and fixed gear culture. And I just thought it was very very cool, and I really loved the idea of living your life day to day on a bicycle, doing errands by bike, a car-free lifestyle. And, that was very attractive to me. ...after graduating from the University of Michigan with a linguistics degree (laughs), I decided the first logical step was to work at a bicycle store.

JP: Yeah, OK, people gotta talk about bikes!

Jess: So, I worked there as kind of the newbie floor retail associate, and it became quickly apparent that I was there to stay, and that I was really passionate and pretty good at my job. So the store trained me, or sent me to my first fitting school which was Fit Kit with Richard Schwinn in Wisconsin. That was my first foray into the bike fit world, and you spend about a week at a bike fit school getting a certification. So, its kind of like going to bike mechanic school and coming out of it. You're not really the best mechanic or the best fitter after a week-long education...

JP: ...but you have some tools...

Jess: You have some good knowledge and some good tools that you get, a really good education. But the thing that really drives it home is experience and practice, and doing fittings over and over again and learning how to recognize those problems or things that you see and how to adjust for them...

JP: So, you feel like you're a coach here, a little bit?

Jess: I do not wear the coaching hat, that's a very special hat, and I'm very careful to not, to not cross lines where it's inappropriate for me to do so. So, coaching is actually an entirely different world, and it takes a lot of education and experience to get certified as a coach, so I might give postural hints or guide someone into postural cues, but really it's my job to fit the bike to how the body presents, and not change the body. It's much easier to adjust the bike than it is to adjust the body. Um, so I'm pretty careful about that line.

But, back to my story, so Fit Kit was the first training school I went to, and after practicing fitting at the shop, doing that for a year or so, they sent me to another fitting certification, which was the Serotta Fitting course,, and I went through the 3 levels of specialized body geometry. I was one of the first 50 people in the country to be a certified Master BG Fit Technician. That was kind of a cool little honor, and because I was in that level of elite bike fitters, I was invited to fit the Specialized Lulu Lemon Team in 2012. And that was a huge honor because I got to work with and fit one of my favorite – I idolize her, Evelyn Stevens, one of my favorite pros...that was a really cool experience. I was star struck when I first got there, but then I quickly realized that pros have the same fit issues that everyday riders do...

JP: ...Do they know it?

Jess: They do know it, yeah, they're just under more grueling circumstances, they're doing it longer, they're doing it professionally, so that made me a little more nervous because I'm really affecting someone's career with my bike adjustments. But, at that point, I had enough certi- I had enough experience that I was confident in my ability to help these professional athletes, and I think they were really happy with the outcome. So, that was a really cool thing that happened, and I was able to take that experience and I even learned some things from the pros out there, and was able to apply it back home.

JP: So you were 10 years down at...

Jess: 10 years at Two Wheel Tango, and then Two Wheel Tango sadly closed its' doors in 2014, rather suddenly they went out of business, and I found myself with this unique skill, and I, and a unique – what's the word- um, a demand! A demand for the service and I had the skill to fill the gap, and so I started my own company. I formed an LLC in January 2015, fitme! And it's been going really well ever since. I partnered with Sic Transit Cycles, we share rent space which is fantastic. It reduces my overhead, it allows my business to be sustainable, I think it would be very hard to be an independent bike fitter without a partner shop like Sic Transit, and they provide the things like handlebars, stems, saddles, thousands and thousands of dollars' worth of inventory that I don't have to keep on my books, and I provide the service. And I also sell custom bikes which are fortunately bikes that are already sold when I order them. So that is also a nice factor for low overhead for my business and sustainability. So it's a match made in heaven (with Sic Transit) and a lot of other fitters who are independent are independent contractors, so they get a cut of the fitting, or they pay a percentage to the bicycle store, and I think our arrangement between Sic Transit and fitmi! Is a little bit more lovely, a little bit more friendly, even though we're two independent businesses we really work symbiotically. It's beneficial for the shop for me to be here, it's beneficial for me, obviously, to be in the shop, and we couldn't be happier.

JP: OK, so, where do your customers come from?

Jess: Well, I've had, most of my customers come from the Ann Arbor area. But lately I'm getting a lot of clients from Grand Rapids area, and further out in Detroit, more like Grose Point Area north of Detroit, versus the Novi and Livonia crowd. I see a lot of people from Lansing, and pretty regularly since I started. There's a large triathlon community there, and I see a lot of those people. Typically I'll fit one or two people from a team or a club, and then the word...

JP: The rest of them come in...

Jess: They're happy with the fit, they're happy with the outcome, they share with everyone in the team, and before you know it I have 50 or 60 people from that club contacting me for fittings.

JP: Nice...

Jess: Yeah, my furthest clients, two of them, were from Chicago, which seems ludicrous to me because...

JP: ...a big town, you'd think the service would be there...

Jess: Right, you would think there'd be 12 excellent bike fitters between here and Chicago, but according to Richard Schwinn who was here a couple nights ago, there's a bit of a void in the fit market, or fit expertise in that area, very surprisingly. But, that was an honor to get someone, two people from as far as Chicago (laughs). That was because I happened to be in a blog, from Steve Hogg, and Steve Hogg is a guru of mine, he's a little esoteric, but he has some really good ideas and is a great fitter. He's in Australia, and he blogs and is kind of an online celebrity perhaps, but he and I were at an industry event together and I was fortunate enough to be at a very top secret, off the books, off the record, um, what do you call it? Convention with him and just his fitters, in a hotel room in Vegas, for the Interbike Show, and he mentioned that I was there in one of his posts about the event, and because of that mentioning that drove business from Chicago.

JP: Wow, that's remarkable, the power of the web...

Jess: Yep, and word of mouth, yeah.

JP: So, 10 cycles go by on the street, can you spot things from up here (2<sup>nd</sup> floor window)?

Jess: (shouts) YES, Absolutely!

JP: How many of the 10, all 10 or...

Jess: What do you mean?

JP: If there was a pack riding by, can you point and say, well, that reach is wrong, or the seat's too low, or whatever...

Jess: Yes, so, it's pretty instant. I'm sure most people who have a good idea about fit, especially fitters, really have to bite their tongue, and it's painful sometimes to hold back what you really want to do to help people that you're riding with, friends, husbands, wives, you know...

JP: ...and I see this both at home-I live on a bike trail, it goes right through the front yard. Probably half the women out there, the seat's too low, and Why? Because they want to have both feet on the ground when they stop.

Jess: So, if you're talking about petite women, or any person under 5'-5", they are at an unfair (dis)advantage because the bottom bracket is the same height off the ground for someone who is 6' tall

as it is for someone who is 5'-5", so they are at a disproportionate height off the ground, and it will be harder for them to reach the ground with the proper saddle height than someone who is closer to 6' tall, as is always the case, so yeah, it's a challenge...

JP: ...and you see kids on last years' bike and they've grown 3" and it's just not right...

Jess: The best is when you're approaching the stranger on Huron River Drive with their saddle either way too high or way too low, 'cause it can go both ways, and you just want to mention, you're trying to rack your brain for a kind way that doesn't put them on the defense, to just softly mention that you might want to try this...

JP: So have you found that?

Jess: I can't do it, I can't cold-mention anything to someone, right, a stranger, but if I'm in a conversation, I can bring it around to the subject and very -ah- delicately, you know, delicately suggest it, and then have a bigger conversation about fit, and kind of work that suggestion in there (laughs), and then it usually becomes a positive thing. But I've learned over the years, you know, I've been doing this for 13 years, I've learned that you gotta (laughs) you gotta dance around it sometimes because there's the ego involved and all the other things.

JP: I have this on-tour all the time, people (guests) who slug along at 55 RPM, and you know, you suggest 'you might want to shift to an easier gear and spin a little faster, "Oh- that'd be way too much work". Sorry, it's not! (Jess laughs)...

Jess: Or the push, I really like the feeling of the push, but my knees are hurting, and you suggest maybe an easier gear with a higher cadence, but now, that just won't fly.

JP: No, it's tough, people are people. So, what else should I ask you?

Jess: Um...gosh...

JP: 'cause we're going to have to condense this down...

Jess: Yeah, totally obviously, um, I think the thing that I would like to, if I could yell one thing out from the mountain tops it would be to get a fit before you buy a bike, um, especially to the change with more consumer direct, consumer direct sales with internet companies, like Canyon. Canyon makes great bikes, I do like their bikes, but you have to work with an experienced fitter who knows Canyon stuff and knows the right questions to ask, because I had to (ask) it's not on their website. Their key critical fit coordinates that are not on their website such as effective stem, the stem length that comes with their integrated bar, or the handlebar reach of their handlebar. Those are very important fit coordinates to determine, and a lot of, I've seen several bikes come in that were just straight up the wrong size, and it was a consumer direct purchase, and they were bikes over \$3,500.00, so it was not a small mistake...

JP: ...and there's not much to do at that point...

Jess: It was a tragedy, really, and had they got the sizing...

JP: Were they buying too big, or too small?

Jess: One was too small, and one was too big, and the one that was small he said, Well, I went by the height guide, and it was, the bike was way too small for him, and the height guide is really a bunch of hooey, it doesn't tell you that much at all. So, yeah, get your fit before you get your bike. There's no penalty, so for my business model, there's no penalty for getting your bike fit before you buy your bike, I deduce that, I vouch, what's the word, I deduce that off the cost of the fit, so you're not out any extra money by doing your homework before you buy your bike. I don't think that's in there (my blog draft)...

JP: ...but I did say here "Her advice is Independent"...

Jess: Independent, yeah, that's what we're here to do...

JP: we're not changing the bike to fit you, we're finding the bike that fits (without changes)...

Jess: right, and unfortunately, I mean this, I'm uniquely positioned in this consumer direct market, because if you go to a bike store, they will try to sell you the bikes they have- as they should because they're in business and they're trying to make money. But, if you go to a fitter, they will always prioritize the bikes that they have on the floor, and they may not actually have a bike in that store within that brand that is an ideal fit...

JP: Which is what you told me...

Jess: So, yeah, it's really nice to be in a position where I can be 100% honest and open and look at all of the brands out there equally as contenders and rule them out if they're not the best fit for you.

JP: So, in my particular case, we ruled out what percentage of the bikes on the market, 85%?

Jess: Yes

JP: It brings the focus down...

Jess: Yeah, and makes the search a lot easier. Plus, you're empowered. The other aspect I'd like to say is after a fitting you're empowered. You know what your coordinates are. I teach you how to use the numbers, and teach you about the main things, your stack and reach targets, and you can go into a store knowing your saddle height, knowing models that will work for you, sizes that are appropriate, and that way if you have an inexperienced sales person, you're one over them. You know, you're not going to make a mistake, or have them make a mistake for you.

JP: OK, perfect, thank you.