DISABILITY JUSTICE LOOKS LIKE THIS

Sporting moments that matter

Elevate Her is a grassroots, feminist, women-led Organisation of Persons with Disabilities based in Kenya. We are dedicated to protecting and advancing the rights of women and girls with disabilities, non-binary persons with disabilities, as well as caregivers of children with disabilities in marginalised communities.

The ONSIDE fund has supported our work at the intersection of gender, disability, and sport. Most of the women and girls we work with come from informal settlements around Nairobi. They're students, market vendors, mothers, and caregivers. Some lost limbs to illness, some were born with impairments, and others developed conditions later in life. What they share isn't a diagnosis, it's the experience of being told, repeatedly, that their bodies are problems to be managed, not athletes to be trained.

We engage them through paracycling. It's not that cycling fixes everything, but it offers something rare: a space where their bodies are assets, not liabilities. On a tandem bike, the person in front steers and the person behind powers. Both matter equally. That structure teaches something our participants rarely get elsewhere, interdependence as a strength, not a weakness.

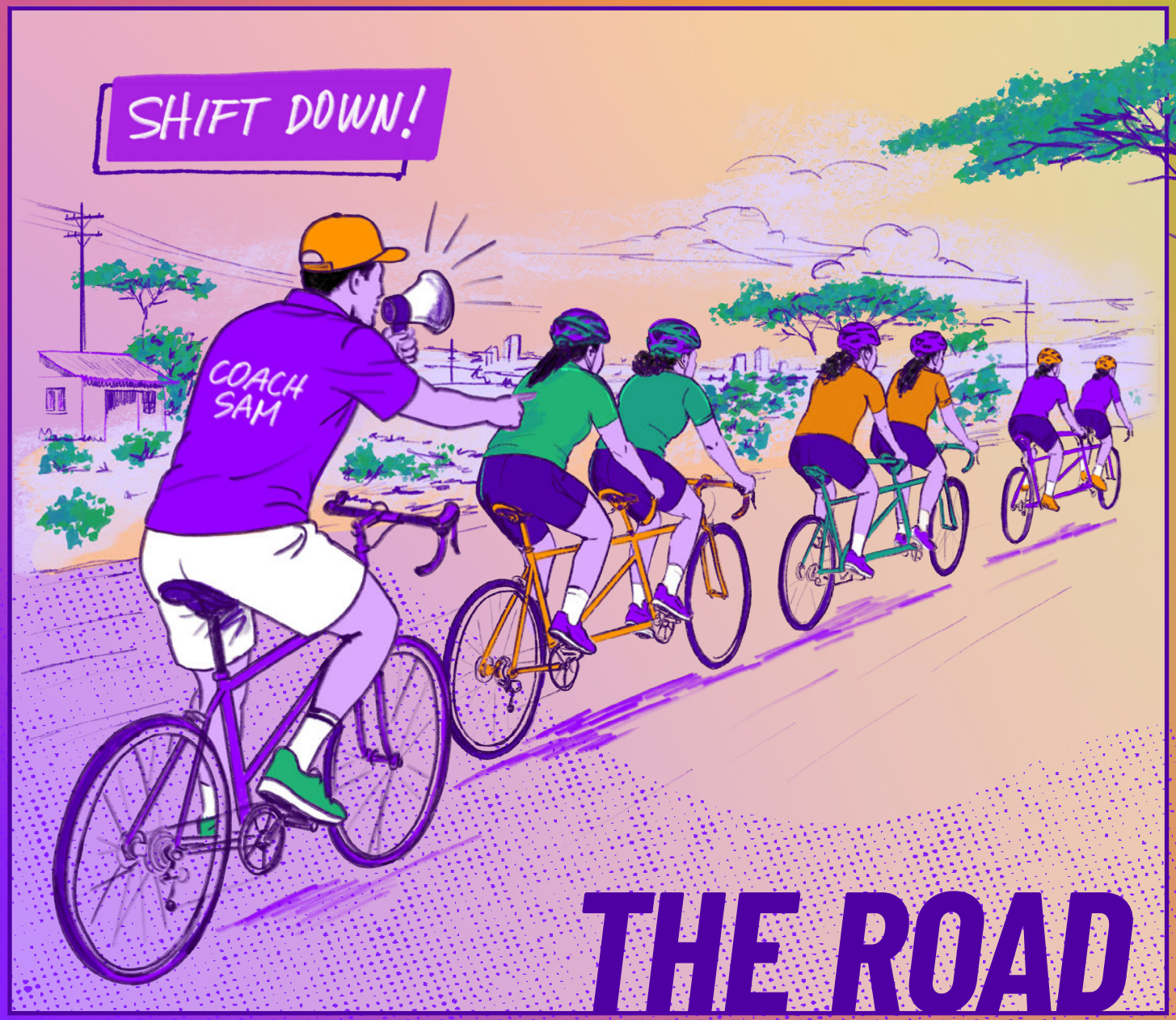
The motivation that brings the athletes to paracycling varies - some want mobility, others want competition, and some just want a morning where nobody asks them what's wrong with them. What we're seeing, consistently, is that these women don't need more inspiration, nor do they need to be cast as inspirations themselves. Instead, they need equipment that fits, coaches who know adaptive techniques, transport to training, and race entries that don't require us to repeatedly ask to be included. They need the system to stop treating them as charity cases and start treating them as athletes. That's the gap we're trying to close.



These three stories come from our daily work. They're small moments: a debrief, a training session, and a race tent. Though not dramatic or headline-worthy, each one marks a shift. They're indicators that something is changing in how these athletes are seen and in how they see themselves.

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We train in the morning because the roads are clear then. Six women, three tandems. Coach Sam rides alongside and calls out actual feedback: "shift down," "hold your line," "you're surging." Not idle encouragement, but clear instructions, the kind you give to people you're taking seriously. This matters because most of these women have never had a coach before. They've had helpers, volunteers, and well-wishers. People who meant well but not coaches. Coach Sam is different - he trained specifically in paracycling, sought out the certification, and treats these sessions like what they are: athletic training and not community service. People at the roadside stop and watch. Sometimes they stare. The riders don't notice or don't care. They're working. Heart rates up, legs burning, trying to hold a wheel.

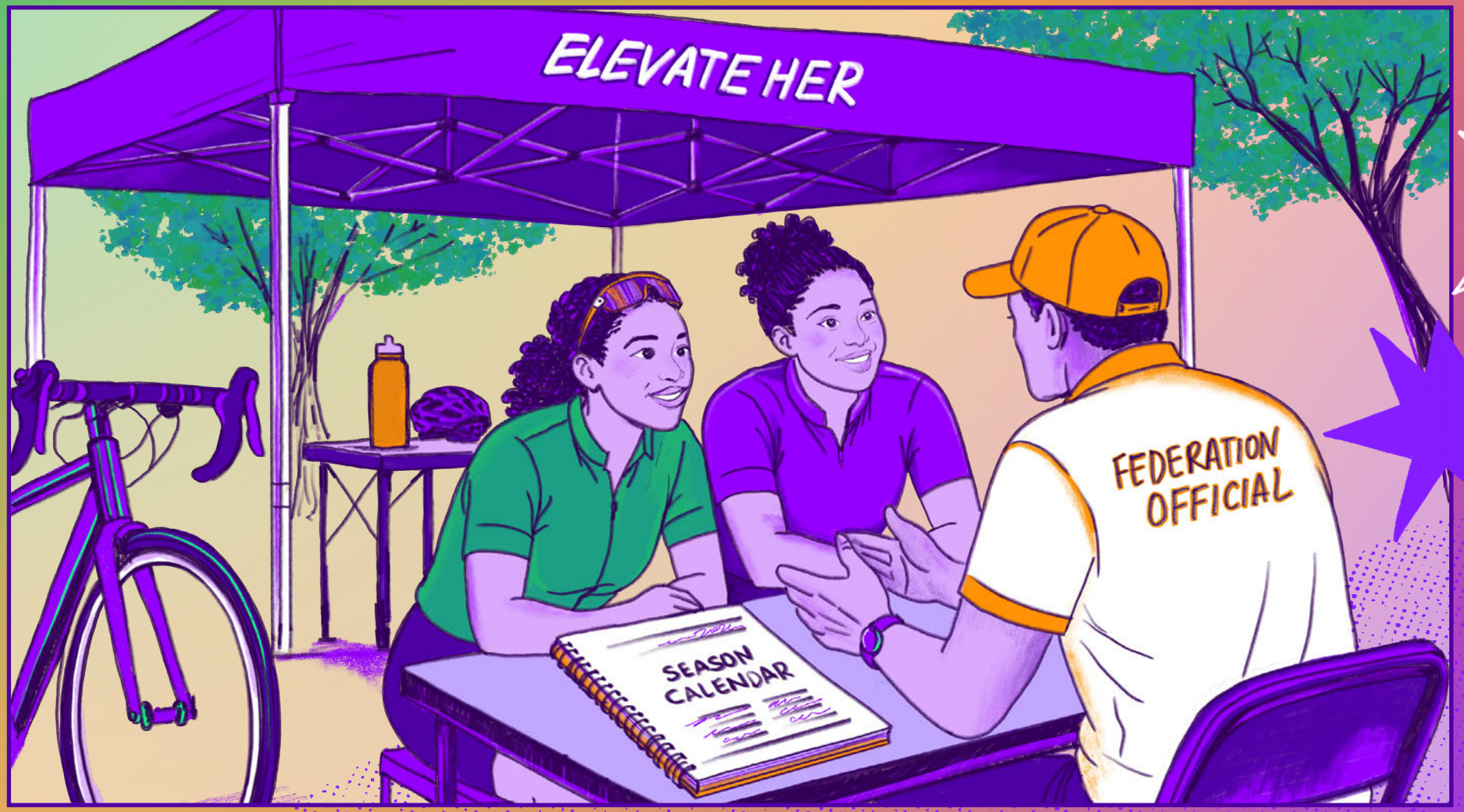


THE ROAD



Last week a kid asked his dad what they were doing. The dad said, "training." Not "those poor women, what an inspiration." Just training. That's new and that matters.

It is race day. The team tent is in the main area now, not tucked behind the toilets like it used to be. The bikes are racked alongside everyone else's. Same mechanic, same queue for bike checks. This took two years of asking - persistent, documented, boring advocacy, emails to federation officials, attendance at meetings, and showing up with the athletes so they couldn't be abstracted into statistics. Eventually someone decided it was easier to move the tent than keep saying no. The athletes are fully immersed in the happenings of the day - the commentator calls out their names with times and rankings, the federation official is there talking about next season's calendar, speaking to them as part of the plan, not an afterthought.



THE TENT

In the group photo we took last month, you can see women in proper race kits, with proper backing and training, looking like what they are: athletes who pushed through the barriers imposed upon them. They didn't achieve this through patience and hope, but by showing up until the system had to make room for them to take part on the same terms as everyone else.

Tamara and Naomi cross the finish line as a team. They've been training as a tandem pair for eight months, Tamara on the front, Naomi stoking from the back. They know each other's breathing by now. Both women joined Elevate Her through community outreach in one of the urban informal settlements in Nairobi. Tamara had never been on a bike before. Naomi used to observe cyclists pass her house and wonder if there was a version of that for someone like her. Finding each other as partners took trial and error, different heights, different strengths, different tempers, but they stuck with it.



THE FINISH LINE



After the race, they gather and talk about what went wrong: Tamara's grip slipped on the last corner. Naomi says the saddle was too high. They compare notes on the course. Someone brings them water. Nobody takes a photo for a brochure about "overcoming adversity." Two athletes debriefed a race they both wanted to win and that is it. That's the whole story.

And that is precisely the point - eight months ago, nobody would have asked Naomi what went wrong in her race. They would have congratulated her for showing up. Now she's getting technical feedback, same as any competitor. The finish line didn't change. The expectations did.



These stories don't have dramatic endings because the work isn't finished. The federation official might not return next season. The tent could move back. The audience might speak about them as "brave women" when we aren't listening. What holds these gains in place is continued pressure, continued presence, and continued refusal to accept less.

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At Elevate Her, we document these moments not to celebrate them as victories, but to mark them as evidence. Proof that change is possible when athletes are treated as athletes. With the right investment, qualified trainers, proper equipment, and structured training programmes, athletes with disabilities are supported to train seriously and compete at their best. The justice we are training for is achieved when organisations commit to showing up not once, but consistently, until the default position shifts from charity to professionalism.