



IF SHE CAN DO IT,
MAYBE I CAN TOO



Eva Hoekstra

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When I moved to Downtown Toronto from the suburbs, I realised very quickly that the best way to get around was by bike. So, I went on a hunt and found an old Raleigh cruiser for \$15 from a thrift store. I named him Red. The next day preparing for my first ride to work, I was nervous. The ride would only take about 10 minutes, but the route was all busy main streets. I was so set on getting a bike, but I never stopped to think about what it would be like riding in the city. I looked at Red locked up on the porch and decided tomorrow was a better day and instead I walked to work. The next day arrived and I still wasn't ready. The last time I had been on a bike I was twelve years

old. So, there I was, almost ten years later feeling nervous to get on a bike again. All week I got up, left my apartment, looked at my bike on the porch, debated for a few seconds in my head and then walked to work. Finally, it was the weekend. It was time to take old Red out for a spin. I stayed on the side streets that surrounded my apartment. I felt great, even better than great. I was filled with feelings of excitement! What was I so nervous about? It only took a few weeks before I started flying down the streets to work. I would ride as fast as I could and then hit the back brake to come to a skidded stop. I felt like a kid again. After a few bike upgrades and additions along the way, I had



WOMEN CYCLING

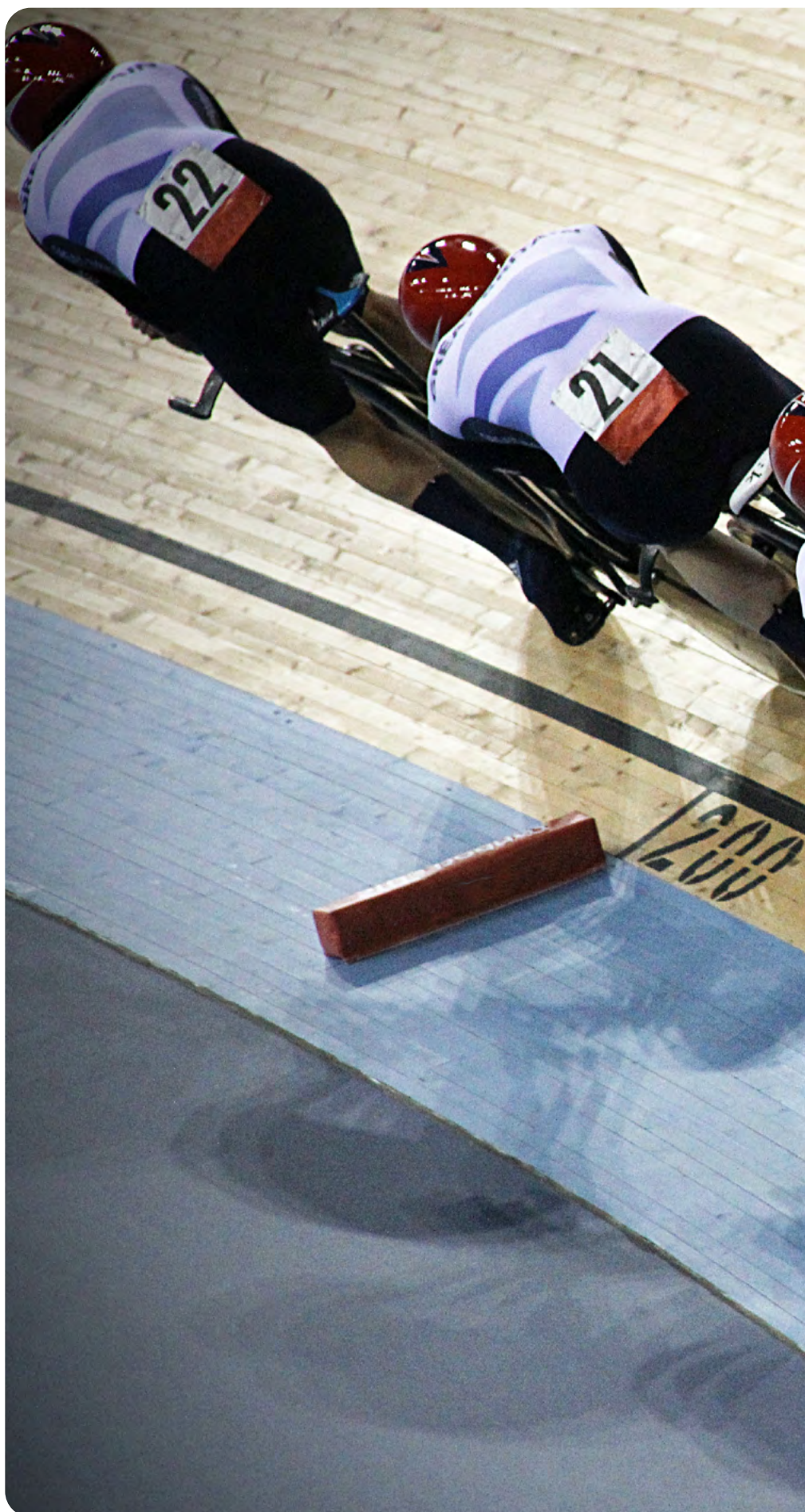
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gained the reputation of being “bike crazy” by my friends. I was the person my friends came to when they needed a bike. I was happy to help. There was nothing more fun than cruising around with your friends rolling from one spot to the next.

After a few years I was introduced to the fixed gear track bike. I learned in an instant that if the wheel is rolling the crank arms keep moving, so if you're not careful it can kick you off like an irritated rodeo horse. The next thing I knew, a friend was helping me build my first fixed gear. We found an old 80's Benotto frame. I sanded and painted it, a Pistachio green. We pieced together parts and just like that Benny was born. This bike was my new favourite thing! I rode it every day, no matter the weather.

The next summer I started working at Mountain Equipment Coop, a local outdoor store that has a bike shop. I was put in the cycling department, with a team of about ten guys, myself and one other woman. It was a steep learning curve, I thought I knew enough about bikes, but I was wrong. It was really intimidating being around all these guys who knew so much more than me. And I could tell some customers were picking up on that as well. So, I listened and asked my colleagues a ton of questions. Once I started to gain more knowledge, I was able to help customers with a lot more confidence.

One day I overheard some chatter in the bike shop about this race event happening in the city. When I got home, I went online and was blown away to see it was an event Red Bull had created where cyclists would have to race around in circles for the fastest time on a steep and incredibly tiny version of a velodrome. Each rider would be timed doing 10 laps - they called it the Red Bull Mini Drome. The event has been held around the world and now they had brought it to Toronto. I found videos from past events held in London. What the heck was this, how is this a thing? I watched video after video of the cyclists racing on the mini drome, some people flying off the edge into the crowd. It looked incredibly exciting but terrifying all at the same time. Then I saw her. Juliet Elliott. She was from England, only a few years older than me and she was killing it. After watching her video, seeing her confidence and ability I thought, if she can do it, maybe I can too. I've never really had a female role model in my life,







especially when it came to sports. Seeing Juliet struck something inside me that fuelled my confidence as a cyclist.

I registered for the race. If I didn't do it in that moment, I'd likely find a reason not to. Immediately after I felt a rush of complete panic. How the heck am I going to get ready for this? I had never ridden a velodrome before, never mind a smaller, way steeper version of one. To make matters even worse, I hated competition. I rarely participated in competitive sports growing up. It was always so stressful. Maybe I was totally nuts but I wanted to go for it.

I realised quickly that I needed to practice riding on a banked wall. One of the guys in the shop mentioned it could be helpful to ride around in a skate park with a big bowl. This proved to be great advice. I went to one a few days later and when I arrived, there was a gang of kids skateboarding and riding BMX bikes. I pulled up slowly looked over the edge into the bowl. As I looked back up, I realised that all the kids had cleared out of the area. I can only imagine what they were thinking, that I must have looked like someone's mom rolling up to the park, I was at least 10 years older than them. I dropped my bike into the bowl and rode around slowly. After a few fumbles, I started to get the hang of it. It was pretty fun! Of course, this wouldn't compare to the Mini Drome but I felt one step closer to my goal. As the days approached, I would often re-watch

Juliet's video. The more I watched the more confidence I felt. I never really focused on the fact that she was a pro rider and had way more experience than I did. I could see some part of myself in her.

A few days before the race a friend called me. After seeing crash videos online, he was worried I could get really hurt and insisted I shouldn't do it. It wasn't a nice call to get from a friend but I was able to shake it off.

And before I knew it, it was Race day. I arrived at the event and it was packed. As I made my way through the crowd, I saw the Mini Drome for the first time. When I tell this story in person, I usually do the classic jaw drop face accompanied by a slow blink to express how I felt in that moment. It was a little overwhelming, what had I gotten myself into? I quickly made my way over to the check-in table. I've been told that I wear my emotions on my sleeve. I can only imagine what my face looked like as I told the man my name. He gave me my race plate and the waiver to sign. Before I walked away he looked to me and said, "when it's your turn, make sure you commit". In that moment, I felt very aware that it was mostly men doing the race and I might have stuck out like a sore thumb. There were only a few other women registered to ride so everyone was in one category.

I stood in the crowd and watched rider

after rider take their turn, some crashing, some not able to get on the wall and many doing incredibly well. I watched a woman crash hard. This did not help my nerves along with the high energy in the room. Then eventually it was finally my turn. I got into the centre of the drome, got comfortable on my bike, took a deep breath and looked up. The walls were steep. And not like the skate park bowl, these walls seemed impossible. I paused for a moment to think of Juliet Elliott. She did it and so can I.

The man at check-in's words ran through my head. I had to commit, I had to push through the doubt. And in that moment, I took off. I was riding round and round as fast as I could go. Feeling like at any moment I could fly off the edge, my adrenaline was pumping higher than I've ever felt. I completed my 10 laps (which felt like 50) and they rang the bell. I can't believe I really did it! It's done. I will always remember that feeling, a feeling I've never felt before. I DID IT!!!

Nearing the end of the event, they announced the winner along with second and third place. Then, to everyone's surprise they announced at the last minute they decided to give an award to the fastest woman. Me. The crowd was cheering, a friend ran over and hugged me. The energy in the room was incredible and I was completely shocked! I didn't enter the race thinking I had a chance to win. I really just wanted to see if I could do it. And I did.