A new initiative is set to expand professional-level cycling across Africa through virtual training and racing, offering young riders a route into international competition without the traditional barriers of travel and visas.

The virtual Performance Centers (VPC) program, led by non-profit organization Team Africa Rising (TAR), aims to have over 1,000 young cyclists online by the time of the next UCI World Championships in September 2026.

The program builds on TAR's partnerships with Zwift and Wahoo, which provide e-trainers, heart rate monitors, and software licenses to participating riders and clubs.

According to TAR CEO Kimberly Coats, virtual racing is helping "democratize the sport" across the continent, enabling athletes to assess their performances against both regional and international competitors.

"African cyclists can assess their strength and performance against each other and the best in the world," said TAR CEO Kimberly Coats. "Our goal is to have riders training and racing in all 54 countries on the continent and to launch the first-ever African e-sport Continental Championship."

The initiative has already impacted several African cycling hubs at the recent UCI Cycling World Championships in September 2024; many of the continent's top riders were also frequent Zwift competitors.

Watch video: https://www.youtube.com/watch

The Masaka Cycling Club in Uganda has been using virtual platforms for over five years, and its presence in the Top 30 virtual teams globally has attracted international attention.

With the cost of international travel and the accompanying challenge of securing travel visas, many young African cyclists still struggle to realize their dream of getting a change at professional road racing.

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019, when the global travel came to halt, Masaka Cycling Club saw an opportunity, as co-founder Ross Burrage explains:

"Virtual racing has been a game changer for us." said Ross Burrage, "Zwift has supported our program for over five years. Our coaches can fast-track the knowledge transfer through the platform, Cadence, efficiency, timing, positioning,

preparations, training and team ethos can be learnt and transferred to the road, and it is safe."

"Our roads can become dangerous, so virtual racing offers an alternative," he added. "Masaka's presence in the Top 30 virtual teams globally is also a reward for effort for riders. We are a reward for our rider's effort and has attracted interest from the global cycling community."

Early adopters also include the Lunsar Cycling Team in Sierra Leone, Benin's National Cycling Federation, and the Goma Cycling Club in DR Congo, which began online training despite local restriction on outdoor cycling.

The Virtual Performance Center in Rwanda helped Java-Inovotec Cycling Team to reach the podium in a recent Kirehe Road Race.

In Rwanda, the program has recently launched at the Java-Inovotec UCI Continental Team house in Kigali, where a dozen e-trainers have been installed under the supervision of Team Principal Pascal Ndizeye.

Virtual Performance equipment arrived in Rwanda

Read: Exclusive interview with Pascal Ndizeya: How Virtual Training Is Empowering Rural Cyclists in Rwanda

TAR plans further expansion with new centers in Algeria, Zambia, and Ghana, alongside upgrades in Uganda.

Zwift, a long term partner of TAR, is providing the technology and licenses for the program. Kate Veronneau, Director of Women's Strategy at Zwift, commented on the initiative:

"At Zwift, we believe the power of cycling should be accessible to everyone, everywhere. Supporting TAR reflects our commitment to growing the sport globally and opening doors for emerging talent."

"We are proud to play a role in helping African cyclists gain more opportunities,

visibility and connection within the international cycling community," Veronneau added.

Virtual training is already shaping competition outcomes. Many riders who performed strongly at the recent UCI Road World Championship and African Continental Championships are frequent Zwift participants.

"Virtual training platforms like Zwift are revolutionizing cycling development in Africa," said Jeremy Ford, an African cycling analyst. "They allow young riders to compete internationally without the prohibitive costs of travel, while providing coaches with detailed performance data. If leveraged correctly, programs like Team Africa Rising's Virtual Performance Centers could dramatically accelerate talent identification and professional pathways across the continent."

Looking ahead, TAR plans to launch the first African e-sport Continental Championships, potentially creating a formal competitive pathway for virtual racing. Officials say this could complement traditional road cycling programs and help African riders gain international exposure.