



ILLUSTRATION: RICH KELLY

The George Street Hill Climb

by Bill Pierce

For more than ten years cyclists of all persuasions have gathered at the corner of Main and George Streets in Worcester, Massachusetts, on the fourth Sunday in July to attempt the George Street Bike Challenge. While Lycra shorts and colorful jerseys are the fashion of the day, few of the more than 100 competitors consider themselves “racers.” One by one, riders nervously wait their turn at the bottom of an alley-like 500-foot long road, which runs uphill with an average grade of 18%. Although the race is short, it is considered a quad-buster; its incline is so steep walking down is difficult, especially when wearing cycling shoes and cleats. The George Street Bike Challenge is a community event in which participants of all stripes are surrounded by cheering crowds as they sprint up a hill once used for training by the “Fastest Bicycle Rider In The World.”

The first time I rode up George Street I made my presence known when a third of the way up the course, the cleat of my right shoe came loose from its pedal and I almost toppled over. Embarrassed, I made my way back to the start line where another rider was preparing to race against the clock. After preparing all summer, I felt confident enough to try George Street on my fixed gear, which was outfitted with a 42-tooth chainring and a 20-tooth cog. But my best-laid plans were complicated by not anticipating the slightly worn pedal cleat.

“We’re going to give this rider another chance,” the smiling announcer told spectators and riders alike over the PA system as I carefully worked my way down to rejoin the other competitors who would need to go off before my do-over. Standing on the sidelines holding my bike and alone with my thoughts, I was startled by a fit-looking woman of about my age who came up to me with a coy smile and said she was a triathlete. She added that she wanted to compete in the hill climb, too, but it was her “rest day.” I tried to ignore her comment. I had come to George Street to ride the same course my sports hero, Marshall “Major” Taylor, trained on and I was angry my efforts were going to leave me with a “Did Not Finish.” Suddenly she caught my attention with the remark, “You have to do it.”



PHOTO: PETE BANACH

The George Street Challenge is an annual fundraiser for the Major Taylor Association (www.majoraylorassociation.org), a Worcester-based non-profit that celebrates the life and accomplishments of cycling's 1899 World Champion, Marshall "Major" Taylor. The "Major" was a superb cyclist whose speed, strength, and tactics helped him sprint through packs of the fastest riders in the world on velodromes across half of the United States, Europe, and Australia.

Over the last few years, numerous books have been written about cycling at beginning of the last century and how it was one of the most popular sports in America, rivaled only by boxing and horse racing. Unlike our current infatuation with road races such as the Tour de France, before the Great Depression thousands of spectators would watch cyclists speed around banked wooden tracks found in many American cities. Like current sports stars, professional cyclists, including Taylor, earned substantial wealth during their careers including prize money, gold belts, medals, sponsorship money, and appearance fees. However, despite being an elite rider, Taylor was blocked by one constant adversary: Jim Crow.

Much like other aspects of American life, professional cycling was a white man's game. Although there were African-American cyclists, segregation kept them in separate cycling clubs and competitions. Nevertheless, Taylor gravitated toward cycling. While a youngster growing up in Indianapolis, he learned to ride and his skill and speed caught the attention of racing sponsors when he was just a teen. But as an African-American he was barred from more than half of the velodromes in the United States, and his presence on the track caused deep rifts in the cycling associations that governed the sport.

Taylor recounted his life story in an autobiography, *The Fastest Bicycle Rider In The World*, in which he tells about being fouled and assaulted by other riders. Despite the odds, Taylor persevered, supported by his family, his faith, and a personal moral code which included not racing on Sundays and not drinking or smoking (something other professional athletes had no qualms about doing). When he was nearly at the height of his career, Major Taylor

moved to Worcester, Massachusetts with his wife Daisy. Not only was the city the home of his sponsor, the Iver Johnson Company, it was a community that Taylor felt had minimal prejudice against a Black family.

Almost forgotten when he died in 1932, Major Taylor's story has been kept alive by a growing number of people. In 1948, a group of former professional cyclists, along with Frank Schwinn, the owner of Schwinn Bicycles, moved Taylor's remains from an unmarked grave to one featuring a monument recognizing his contribution to cycling. Taylor's autobiography was a source for other books about his inspirational life including Andrew Ritchie's seminal *Major Taylor: The Extraordinary Career of a Champion Bicycle Racer* (1988).

Then about twenty years ago, Lynne Tolman, a journalist and cyclist, joined other Worcester residents to recognize their city's adopted son by organizing the Major Taylor Association, which is "dedicated to recognizing sportsmanship, promoting nonviolence and caring for those less fortunate." The Association does this through educating schools and the community about Taylor's life as an outstanding athlete and citizen. Recently the Association unveiled a statute of the "Worcester Whirlwind" as a youthful champion with the help of three-time Tour de France winner (and World Champion) Greg Lemond and three-time Olympic Gold Medalist Edwin Moses.

George Street is a wall of a hill.



PHOTO: PETE BANACH

George Street is a daunting wall of a hill. Standing at the bottom, the top is invisible due to a change in the steep grade. The course is framed for the first few yards by two old brick buildings, then trees arch over the tarmac. When the triathlete told me I “had to finish,” I was looking up, contemplating a strategy that would allow me to make it with one good pedal. Perhaps she thought I was going to pack it in when she spoke. But regardless of her motive, I snapped back, “I’m almost 50 years old and divorced and don’t have to do anything.” I guess my retort wasn’t what she expected and within moments she disappeared into the crowd. Then the next thing I knew, my number was called and I was once again held upright by the starter as I snapped my feet into the pedals.

The countdown ended with an electric horn and I did my best to surge forward, placing my weight over my right foot, while pulling up on my left and using my handlebars as leverage. My focus on my right

foot was only heightened as my lungs began to burn. As I climbed, the encouraging shouts from people lining the road helped me drive forward and cross the finish line. Then all too quickly it was over—wheels passed over the taped line on the road and my son ran over to me, congratulating me on finishing.

Riders come from across New England to test themselves on George Street and I have returned again and again to take my place with them. But the event is just as much an opportunity to watch pure competition as it is to accept the hill’s challenge. A smattering of competitors are middle-aged (or so we want to believe) cyclists like me. Some are former racers, others have more recently discovered how exhilarating competition can be. While most of the riders seem to be men, women of all ages are a growing category. There are young riders too—children as young as 12 take their turns to climb one of Worcester’s steepest streets. George Street is even a family event for some. For several years, I’ve watched one family in particular fly up the course on a triplet. Other riders take on the challenge with the newest model carbon fiber uber-bike, trusty road machines or fixed gears. Some finish on ancient 27”-wheeled ten speeds, BMX bikes or mountain bikes. There have even been riders finishing the course on unicycles. But the attraction of George Street to someone who wants to accept its challenge really shows itself when a rider takes on the hill with a handcycle.

Everyone who rides the Challenge faces the same hill and countdown. I learned from my experience of the past several years: no matter how hard you prepare, each time at the line is a moment of truth. As Peter Howard, owner of Barney’s Bicycle in Worcester and one of the Challenge’s organizers as well as one of its fastest riders (28th place overall in 2011), said, “Your brain says one thing and your legs...”

Howard’s adage is right on the mark. For me, George Street has been an opportunity to bring my brain and legs as close together as possible. While most riders are content to challenge friends to a “town-line sprint” during a ride, George Street is a test where riders follow the wheels of the Fastest Bicycle Rider In the World.

Your brain says one thing and your legs...



PHOTO: PETE BANACH