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Major Injustice

The truth about America's first bicycling superstar

BY BRION O'CONNOR

"I shall never forget the thunderous applause that greeted me as I rode my victorious lap of honor around the track with a huge bouquet of roses."
– Marshall "Major" Taylor

The din of 12,000 spectators enveloped Marshall "Major" Taylor and his three rivals as they banked the final turn of the 1-mile world championship at Montreal's Queens Park velodrome in 1899. Two opponents, brothers Tom and Nat Butler of Boston, had the tactical advantage on the pitched oval, partnering to jam Taylor. But on this August afternoon, the 20-year-old African-American was unstoppable.

Unleashing the furious finishing sprint that made him the most feared, most respected and most popular bicycle racers of his era, Taylor flew past the Butlers and France's Courbe d'Outrelon to win by a tire-width. In victory, Taylor added a new title to his glittering résumé: world champion.

The Fastest

Today, as Lance Armstrong eyes an unprecedented seventh Tour de France victory, one of the United States' first sports superstars, a cyclist no less, has been consigned to obscurity. The irony might be amusing if it wasn't profoundly heartbreaking.

Taylor did **stand out,** not only because of the deep chestnut color of his skin, but also because of his talent and his regal bearing.

"You had to be impressed with the sheer speed, which was a huge deal in those days," says Lynne Tolman, board member of the Major Taylor Association (*www.majortaylorassociation.org*). "He titled his [1928] autobiography *The Fastest Bicycle Rider in the World.* But really, he was the fastest human on the planet."

The memory of that victory lap may have stayed with Taylor forever, but history forgot this heroic, deeply religious man. True, Taylor's star still shines in Europe and Australia, where he achieved his greatest professional success, and he is known among cycling aficionados in the United States. But outside those circles, Taylor is anonymous.

Signs of the Times

To appreciate Taylor's struggles and achievements, it's vital to understand the tenor of the times. The United States still ached from Civil War wounds. Between 1890 and 1900, more lynchings of black Americans were reported than in any decade before or since. Even the U.S. Supreme Court, in its unsavory 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, ruled that the doctrine of "separate but equal" was a fair way to deal with the race question.

During the same decades, bicycles rose from oddities to a must-have form of sport and transportation. The new "safety" bicycle, similar in design to racing bicycles today, replaced precarious high-wheelers. The modern age of sport—when events began being staged in public with an audience of paying spectators—was dawning. By the 1890s, bicycle races were wildly popular, rivaling boxing, horse racing and baseball. Contests were held in grand, smoke-filled halls and velodromes, including the original Madison Square Garden in New York City.

"So here we have Taylor coming up at exactly the right moment to create that essential, crucial racial contest," says Scotsman Andrew Ritchie, author of the definitive biography on Taylor. "His timing was impeccable—obviously unconscious, but impeccable."

Rising in the Ranks

Born to descendants of slaves in 1878, Taylor possessed the intuition and intelligence to seize opportunity. Though he lived in the "free state" of Indiana, racial discrimination affected him at an early age. He wasn't allowed to join the YMCA.

When his father went to work for a wealthy white family in Indianapolis, Taylor and the family's young son became inseparable. Taylor had access to the youngster's tutor and his toys, including bicycles. As he grew, Taylor became accustomed to "white" society.

Later, he worked for several bicycle shops, performing stunts for customers in a soldier's outfit and earning the nickname "Major." He acquired his own bicycle, started racing and started winning, to the consternation of his white counterparts.

Eventually, Taylor met cycling fanatic Louis "Birdie" Munger. The encounter proved fortuitous for both—Munger would serve as a father figure, confidante, employer and manager. When Taylor was discouraged from racing against white cyclists in Indiana, he joined Munger in Worcester, Massachusetts, where the racial climate was more accepting. Still, prejudice found Taylor. The League of American Wheelmen (LAW), which sanctioned bicycle racing in the United States, was bitterly divided on the race issue. At the LAW's annual meeting in Kentucky, in 1894, a faction led by a Colonel Watts passed a "white only" rule (over the strenuous objections of the Massachusetts contingent), effectively excluding blacks.

With Munger's support, however, Taylor got a professional racing license from the LAW's New York board. Though a personal triumph, the decision was rife with controversy. The racer, only 17, became a lightning rod.

A rare action shot in Paris, 1903: Taylor comes up from behind

Taylor's landmark **1-mile world championship** in 1899 came precisely 100 years before Lance Armstrong's first miraculous Tour de France victory.

Taylor did stand out, not only because of the deep chestnut color of his skin, but also because of his talent and his regal bearing. "What grabbed me about Major Taylor was his aura of dignity, the way he endured," says Tolman. "He faced so many closed doors and so much open hostility with remarkable dignity. He didn't get up on a soapbox. He didn't get in your face, like a Jack Johnson or Muhammad Ali."

A rare action shot in Paris, 1903: Taylor comes up from behind.

Taylor was reserved and respectful, without being submissive. "He was sharp enough to know that he couldn't have done it any other way, because he would have been dead," says Ritchie. "It worked for him because his personality predisposed him toward the 'turn the other cheek' attitude."

Tolman adds, "There were times when the judges came down against him, and instead of saying 'No fair, not true,' he simply said, 'OK. Let's race again.'"

Though dignified and disciplined off the track, Taylor was a demon on it. Flailing elbows and crashes were common. Taylor often found himself "in the pocket," surrounded by riders bent on blocking his path to the finish. That tactic forced him to race from the front, an unenviable position for a sprinter hoping to save energy by riding in another racer's slipstream. Once in Massachusetts, an opponent, incensed at losing to Taylor, choked him until he fell unconscious. Another time, during a training trip to Georgia, Taylor and his all-white crew were threatened by an anonymous letter, signed by "The White Riders." Taylor and his entourage left immediately.

In 1897 and 1898, Taylor was prevented from challenging for the American sprint championship because he couldn't race the circuit's Southern events. In late 1898, a cadre of top white professional racers broke from the LAW, forming a renegade organization. Taylor, determined to compete against the best riders, joined the "outlaw" faction, but he was betrayed. His rivals conspired to set parameters, such as Sunday racing, that Taylor, a devout Baptist, wouldn't

accept. Humbled, Taylor returned to the LAW. He finished 1898 with seven world records to his name, but he was focusing on the following year.

In 1899, at the age of 20, he captured his world championship in Montreal. Later that year, he also set the paced 1-mile world record in Chicago (averaging 45.5 miles per hour), 11 days before his 21st birthday. He was, in Ritchie's words, "the most hated, the most admired, the most controversial, the most talked about, quite simply the most famous athlete in America."

Success Overseas

Ultimately, Taylor must have tired of the constant struggles of racing in his homeland. Abroad, he was an object of fascination. "When he gets to Europe, it's like the sun coming out after the storm," says Ritchie. "There, race is an issue, but it isn't a question of white honor and the defense of white supremacy against the invading hordes."

Overseas, Taylor became a superstar. At the height of his prominence, he grossed well in excess of $10,000 annually, while pro baseball stars of the time earned, at most, $2,500.

And then, in 1910, at age 32, he retired. "We talk today about people getting their 15 minutes of fame, and it seems it was the same back then," says Tolman. "Taylor was famous when he was racing, and when he retired, *Poof!* His fame faded really quickly."

So did his good fortune. His marriage (to Daisy Morris in 1902) dissolved, his self-published autobiography flopped, illness and business failure sapped his wealth. Taylor died on June 21, 1932, in the charity ward of a Chicago hospital, and was buried in an unmarked grave. He was 53.

A Legacy Rediscovered

The sport, and his country, simply let Taylor fade away. His disappearance from the public eye was dramatic and swift.

Something of the same fate befell the bicycle. "First, a whole generation of men went off to World War I, and then the automobile arrived," says Tolman. "That's all you have to know about cycling in this country."

Or, as Ritchie states in his biography of Taylor, "a dead sport does not remember its own past." Johnson and Robinson owe their legacy in part to the continuing popularity of boxing and baseball.

Following the triumphs of Armstrong and Greg LeMond (a three-time Tour de France winner) and the whirlwind success of mountain biking, today cycling is undergoing a U.S. revival. With that, Taylor is re-emerging. "We like the idea that we can rescue forgotten heroes," adds Ritchie.

The Major Taylor Association plans to erect a statue of the racer at the Worcester Public Library in Massachusetts, and a velodrome in Indiana now bears his name. The recent UCI Track Cycling World Championships held near Los Angeles included a display honoring Taylor. It featured one of his lightweight racing bikes and his defining statement: "Life is too short for a man to hold bitterness in his heart." ■

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