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Investigative reporter Michael Kranish has a new book arriving this spring. It focuses on the extraordinary life of Marshall “Major” Taylor and is a must-read for anyone interested in the history of cycling in the United States. We had a chance to talk to Michael in anticipation of the book’s arrival at your local store in May and learned why he believes Major Taylor should be included in the “pantheon of civil rights figures.”



Michael, what inspired you to write this book? Twenty-two years ago, as a reporter for the *Boston Globe*, I came across the story of Major Taylor, who lived most of his life in Massachusetts. Part of my interest is that I am a cyclist (but not a racer), but I was particularly attracted to this story because I saw it as a unique pathway into exploring the Jim Crow era, as Reconstruction’s failure and the Gilded Age’s excesses took hold. I was struck with this question: How did this young man, Major Taylor, just months after the Supreme Court adopted its infamous ruling allowing “separate but equal” accommodation, ascend to the heights of what was then the nation’s most popular sport? I wrote a magazine story about Taylor for the *Globe* in 2001 and for years did research in hopes of explaining the fuller story.

The racism and what he faced is almost unbelievable and hard to read, yet he continued on.... There’s an extraordinary moment where Taylor faced so much racism that his mentor and manager, Birdie Munger, applied lotion that supposedly would make a black person look white. Taylor reluctantly agreed, but the lotion was dangerous and ineffective. Taylor decided that the racism against him would become his motivation to win, not just for himself but also for the wider cause of equality for his race. That was a turning point in Taylor’s life.

After writing the book, what inspires you the most about Major Taylor and his place in athletics and in the greater struggle for equality inside and outside sport? I was interested in Taylor not just because he became a world cycling champion, but also because he used sport for the greatest purpose—to show what a person can accomplish with complete dedication, and to demonstrate that the abhorrent racist theories of the time were flat-out wrong. Many competitors tried to ban Taylor

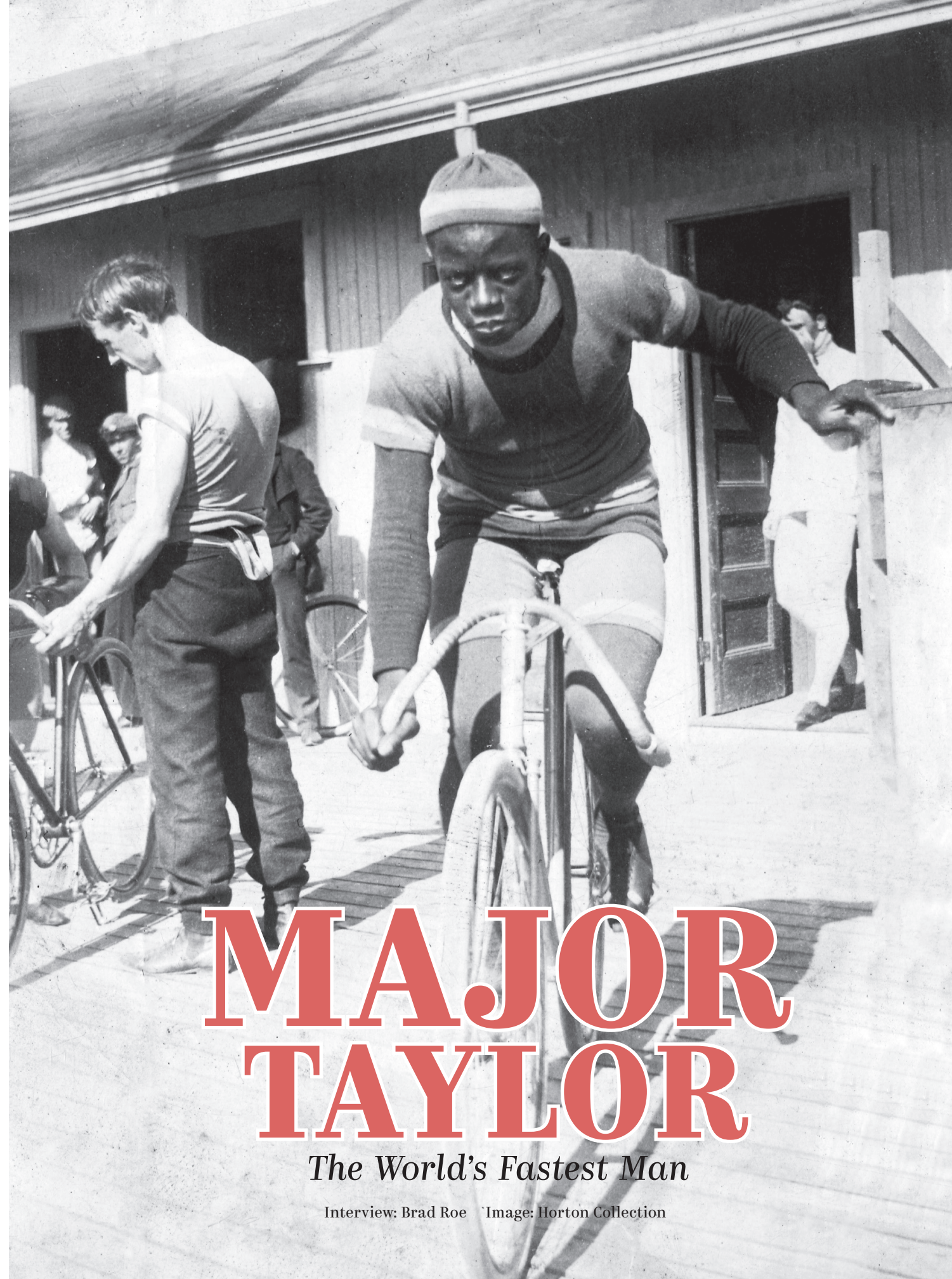
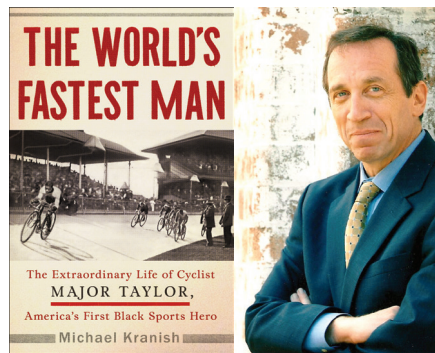
on grounds that a black shouldn’t be allowed to race, but it was clear that they actually wanted him off the track because they knew he would beat

them—and prove wrong the theories on which they based their prejudice.

Other than the current Hennessy television commercial, Major Taylor remains outside the cultural narrative unless you are a serious cyclist. Why do you think that is and is your hope that this book begins to elevate him to the status he deserves in U.S. history? Major Taylor belongs among the pantheon of civil rights figures. He became a national and world champion a dozen years before Jack Johnson and a half-century before Jackie Robinson; he paved the way. One of the interesting anecdotes I came across was that the boxer Jack Johnson was inspired by Taylor and first hoped to be a bicycle champion. But after racing and crashing, Johnson ended up in the hospital with a serious injury. “That accident led me to give up cycling and look for a less dangerous profession,” Johnson later said. He decided to become a boxer. It was a sign of just how dangerous track cycling was—many of Taylor’s contemporaries were seriously injured or killed while racing—and a testament to Taylor’s ability to overcome the mental and physical challenges.

What was it like spending time with Taylor’s daughter and talking to her about her dad? In 2001, when I was researching Taylor for the story for the *Boston Globe’s* Sunday magazine, I had the opportunity to visit Sydney Taylor, who was then 96 years old and living in a nursing home. She was vibrant and delightful, and vividly remembered her father’s exploits. She saw him race in Paris and grew up with the stories of his career. She had some bitterness about how it all ended, a story I tell in the book. I used some of that material in the magazine story, but when I wrote the book, I went back to my notes and found a number of things that I hadn’t previously quoted.

For example, she told me that when her mother first met her father, her mother’s family initially objected to a relationship with a cyclist, for reasons that I explain. It is one of those nuggets that I mention in perhaps a sentence, but it helps us understand the time in which they lived. Taylor’s story is, I believe, not only among the most unique in the history of American sport, but also a window into one of the tortured times in the history of our nation. Somehow, Taylor persevered and became, as I say in the book’s title, “The World’s Fastest Man.” michaelkranish.com *Pm*



MAJOR TAYLOR

The World’s Fastest Man

Interview: Brad Roe Image: Horton Collection