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Marshall W. "Major" Taylor rode into the record books in 1899 and became one of the highest-paid athletes of his day.

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# HE RACED THE BEST

By Bob Percival

**I**T IS MONTREAL, Aug. 12, 1899. Bicycle riders are spinning at 30 miles an hour around the velodrome. At stake is the one-mile sprint world championship.

As the pack zips out of the last turn toward the tape, a U.S. rider jumps the field, blasting into the lead.

His legs pump furiously below his crouched body. He flashes across the finish line a full length ahead of the runner-up. The crowd roars.

With that victory, Marshall W. "Major" Taylor, age 20, wrote himself into the record books as the first black American world champion in any sport, according to his only child, Sydney Taylor Brown of Schenley Heights.

Mrs. Brown has lived in Pittsburgh more than 40 years. She worked 27 years for the Veterans Administration Hospital in Oakland, retiring as a clinical social worker.

"What father's accomplishments mean to people I don't know," she says, "but what it should mean is that he was a man who lived long before Negroes has opportunities. He came by his opportunities accidentally, but he behaved in such a way that his trainer told him he would one day be the world's champion. And he was."

Taylor was born in Indianapolis on Nov. 26, 1878 and got his start in racing there. But at the age of 15, Taylor was barred from racing in the city.

"The riders gave him a hard time because my father was beginning to be too fortunate in winning races," explains Mrs. Brown.

Taylor left Indianapolis for Worcester, Mass., at the age of 17 when his manager, trainer and friend, Louis D. "Birdie" Munger, moved there. Munger had resigned from his job in an Indianapolis bicycle factory because of his involvement with Taylor. He was convinced his protege would one day be a world champion bicyclist.

"Why this man (Munger) went to Worcester, I'll never know," says Mrs. Brown, "but I do know that after he got there he opened a bicycle manufacturing shop.

"Worcester was the one place where my father was allowed, not only to live at the YMCA, but to use their training facilities. They had a gymnasium and everything else.

"When he first went to Worcester he had a contract to ride on the

Keith Theater Circuit. This was when they still had vaudeville. He did trick riding. I don't think he ever mentioned this part of his life."

In addition to trick riding, Taylor trained diligently for sprint racing under Munger's tutelage. The training paid off handsomely three months before Taylor's 21st birthday. That was the day the Worcester Whirlwind became world champion in the mile sprint by beating the cream of the world's bicycle sprinters at the world meet in Montreal. Although this was the pinnacle of Taylor's career, he also claimed the American sprint points championships of 1898, 1899 and 1900.



Album shot of Taylor in his prime

Taylor traveled to Europe three times and Australia twice to race the best those continents had to offer. He returned home victorious each time.

Bicycling fans worldwide loved Taylor, even if white American riders didn't. Taylor was able to cash in on his popularity and was one of the highest-paid athletes of his day. Unlike many athletes, Taylor did not spend his money foolishly. In fact, he watched his expenses like an accountant.

Mrs. Brown can pull diaries from her father's memorabilia easily proving this. "He kept innumerable diaries, listing every penny he spent. Twenty cents for headache tablets, 60 cents for laundry, breakfast 25 cents, lodging \$2, telegram 25 cents."

"Now, here's something about 'embraced religion Friday, Jan. 14, 1898.' And here's the Bible he always carried," says Mrs. Brown, holding up the tattered book. "He was very religious. Throughout his notes there are quotes from the Bible. I guess they were about his problems of the day."

Because he was religious, Taylor refused to ride his wheel on the Sabbath. White racers and promoters used this against him, scheduling important meets on Sunday so they could pick up points on Taylor.

There were other tactics to keep him from succeeding. He was boxed (surrounded by other riders so that he couldn't win even if he had the strength), combinations of riders teamed up against him, and he was generally given the short end of the stick whenever possible.

"He believed, as far as blacks were concerned, that they had to stick with it, never give up, never say die," says Mrs. Brown. "That's what he really believed. Live a good clean life. He'd be very

uncomfortable in the world today, the way everyone carries on."

Unfortunately, even clean living and faith didn't help Taylor cope with the pressures of professional racing, and in 1905 he suffered a collapse. The collapse, according to Mrs. Brown, was a nervous breakdown. Although Taylor toyed with the idea of making a comeback he never did, and officially retired from racing in 1910.

Little of Taylor's racing history is lost because Taylor chronicled his career in his 1928 autobiography, "The Fastest Bicycle Rider in the World." More recently, Mary Scioscia's book for children, "Bicycle Rider," published last year, recounts Taylor's early life.

What Mrs. Brown can do is answer the big question that most people have about Taylor: What did the world's first black American world champion do after retiring?

As a result of his thrift during his career, Taylor retired in 1910 with quite a nest egg. He settled in Worcester with his wife, Daisy Victoria Morris, and daughter. Taylor operated several businesses, including the Excello Oil Manufacturing Co. and the Major Taylor Manufacturing Co., and he brought one of the first rubber vulcanizing machines (for repairing car tires) to Massachusetts.

"Father had the idea of using his money to make more money," Mrs. Brown says, "but he didn't. The things he involved himself in were things I think he didn't know enough

One such sample was a sectional spring tire he invented for heavy equipment. "He invented an automatic, rubberless tire," says Mrs. Brown. "He held a patent on it and everything. He used masses of his money to get this project off the ground, but he involved men who were supposedly his friends, and eventually they got the whole thing away from him. In the end he lost everything and ended up going into bankruptcy."

Despite his inability to succeed in business, as he had racing on the velodromes of the world, Mrs. Brown remembers, "He was a great guy in Worcester. That was back in the days when blacks weren't great anywhere. But he was up there and everybody knew him and liked him and was proud of him because he brought a lot of good publicity to the city of Worcester."

Many of the famous blacks of his time sought Taylor out. Among those who visited him were historian-educator William E.B. Dubois, W.C. Handy (Booker T. Washington's adviser at Tuskegee Institute), Dr. Charles Drew (the Harvard graduate who discovered plasma) and Jack Johnson (the first black heavyweight champion).

Although they were seeking out her father's advice, Mrs. Brown has a slightly different view of Taylor: "To me he was just a father like anyone else's father."

She also adds that the stern determination that led him to the world championship

*Continued on page 22*



Barred from racing in Indianapolis, Taylor went on to world fame

*Continued from page 17*

remained with him all his life. "What Mr. Munger told him about being clean and good and righteous, carried over into his later life. He was either stupid enough or smart enough to stick with it. And I think that if he hadn't adhered to them so closely he would have enjoyed his life more and my mother would have enjoyed her life more.

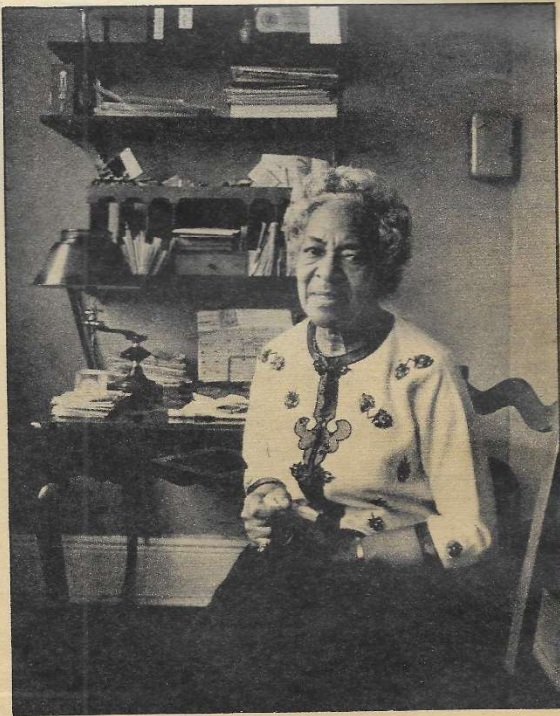
"He was a very controlled man. He was a rigid person. Very well disciplined and stern. He was very honest, and he was moral. He never had whiskey around, no eggnog at Christmastime, no card playing, absolutely very rigid, very well behaved; he had a very good reputation."

Mrs. Brown believes the circumstances under which he was raised added to his strictness. "My father was raised with a rich family in Indianapolis, and everything their little boy learned, he learned. That's where all his tastes for silver and crystal and good manners and perfect speech and all that business came from. He couldn't cotton to anything lowdown and crude, and he carried that right on through to his death.

"Now you can imagine what happened when he returned home to his family after living with this rich family. His brothers' and sisters' standards weren't like his. So, of course, they didn't like him and he didn't like them.

"In his later years I think he wanted to be nice to his family, but they only saw him as a source of money and they bled him and bled him with bills for lawyers, doctors, divorces. Mother and Father used to have long talks

*Continued on page 24*



Sydney Taylor Brown plans to donate her dad's effects to a black heritage institution.

**"Father died of what the doctors called an athlete's heart."**

*Continued from page 22*

about money. His brothers and sisters sent bills for medical help or whatever, and I guess my mother had a hard time persuading him that he had to stop paying them."

Eventually Taylor's stubbornness led to problems with his marriage. "My mother and father separated while I was teaching at West Virginia State College between 1925 and 1930. By that time his book had been published and he was going all over, promoting it. Between 1930 and 1932 I didn't even know where my father was.

"Father died of what the doctors called an athlete's heart, one month before my baby was born. I didn't know it. I didn't know he'd been sick in Chicago's Cook County Hospital. And it was not until after he was dead that somebody from somewhere sent me a copy of *The Chicago Defender*, the black newspaper, saying that Major Taylor had died and been buried in a pauper's grave. Even to this day, the word pauper just kills me. But he's not in that place now."

Nearly 15 years after his death a group called *Bicycling Stars of the Nineteenth Century* held a memorial service at Taylor's new grave in Glenwood Memorial Gardens, Chicago. The group marked the grave with a plaque donated by Frank Schwinn of bicycling fame. Among the speakers at the event

was Ralph Metcalf, one of the black American athletes who upset Hitler's plans for the 1936 Olympics.

"Apparently there is a lot of interest in my father because there isn't a month that goes by that somebody doesn't write a letter saying, 'You don't know me, but I'm interested in your father and wonder if I could come talk to you or talk to you over the phone about your father.'"

Some of the people who come to see Mrs. Brown are among the top bicyclists in the country. For instance, John Howard, an American Olympic cyclist and more recently famous as winner of the Hawaiian Ironman competition and competitor in the Great American Bike Race, stopped by her house last year. "He wanted to know what my father was like as a person, what he did after retiring, that sort of thing."

Last year Mrs. Brown was invited to Indianapolis for dedication of a velodrome named in her father's honor and accepted a key to the city on his behalf.

Mrs. Brown plans to give what's left of her father's memorabilia to a black heritage institution within the not-too-distant future. "I've narrowed it down to two or three places," she says.

Wherever the material goes, it will continue to remind people around the country of this most remarkable black man — the world's first black American world champion in any sport.●

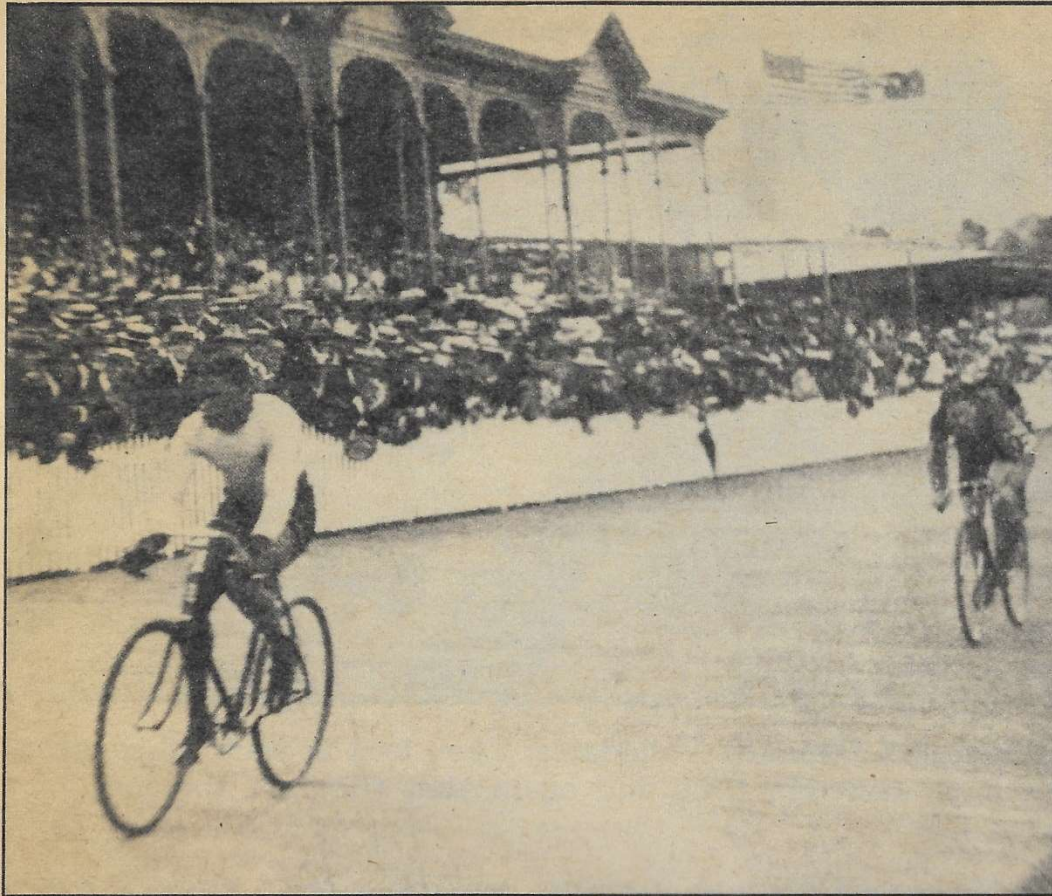
*(Bob Percival of Bloomington, Ind., is a free-lance writer who's basing his master's project at Indiana University on the life of Major Taylor.)*

**ON HANGING IT UP**

MAJOR TAYLOR wrote this poem about his bicycle after retiring from racing in 1910. It is taken from Taylor's autobiography, "The Fastest Bicycle Rider in the World."

A Tribute to My Silent Steed  
 I now hang up my silent steed  
 That served my purpose well indeed  
 Just like a true and faithful friend  
 It stuck right by me to the end  
 Whenever I called on it for speed  
 With a furious spring we took the lead  
 Down the stretch and around the curve  
 Each rider straining every nerve  
 On we dashed at a reckless pace  
 A grim expression on each face  
 Into the home stretch, then the bell  
 A smash, a crash, and someone fell  
 The tumultuous fans how they roared  
 They knew the record would be lowered

Out of a pocket we would slip  
 To win the purse and championship  
 This was a thriller for the crowd  
 Which made us both feel very proud  
 We toured the world and beat the best  
 In many such exciting tests  
 Now as a reward for faithfulness  
 My trusty bike has earned its rest  
 But not in the attic all covered with dust  
 Nor in the cellar to get all rust  
 But in my den on a pedestal tall  
 Or better still upon the wall  
 Where I can see it every day  
 And it will keep the blues away  
 We rode to win in every race  
 Fairly we played in every case  
 If life grows dull and things break bad  
 Just think of the wonderful days we've had.●



Taylor finishes first in the final of the one-mile international championship in 1903 during his initial visit to Australia.