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Long Before Jackie Robinson,
Worcester Cyclist Major Taylor Broke
the Color Barrier in Pro Sports

By Lynne Tolman

With groundbreaking this spring for a Major Taylor statue in Worcester, Mass., the 1899 world cycling champion's legacy of trailblazing rolls into a third century.

The first African-American athlete to become an international superstar will be the subject of Worcester's first monument to an African-American, and, it is believed, the first statue of a bicyclist in the United States.

Because he was a black man challenging whites in an era of deeply ingrained prejudice, Major Taylor was never guaranteed such honors, despite his extraordinary cycling victories and speed records. In fact, he was largely forgotten for most of the 20th century. How his remarkable story finally came out of the shadows is due in great measure to the efforts of modern-day American cyclists.



Taylor, back in form again in 1908, the second year of his comeback, at the Buffalo Velodrome in Paris. The handlebar extension that he pioneered is clearly visible here. *Photo by Branger, Agence Roger Viollet, Paris.*



Marshall Walter Taylor, born in 1878 in Indiana, was nicknamed "Major" as a boy because he wore a military uniform when he performed bicycling stunts outside an Indianapolis bike shop. The shop owner channeled the youth's talent into racing, and he won his first race in 1892, at age 13.

Bicycle manufacturer and racer Louis "Birdie" Munger hired Taylor as a live-in houseboy and factory helper and nurtured his racing career. Munger became a father figure to Taylor as well as his employer and racing manager, and stood up for Taylor in the face of widespread racism.

The League of American Wheelmen, then the governing body for the sport, banned blacks from amateur racing in 1894, just as bicycling's popularity surged. But the move stimulated the growth of black cycling clubs and black races, which gave Taylor his early opportunities to prove his ability.

By the time Munger decided to set up a factory in Worcester -- in part to take advantage of the biking boom, but also to find a more tolerant atmosphere for his black protégé -- Taylor was black champion of the United States.

"I was in Worcester only a very short time before I realized that there was no such race prejudice existing among the bicycle riders there as I had experienced in Indianapolis," Taylor wrote in his 1929 autobiography, "The Fastest Bicycle Rider in the World." In Indianapolis, he had not been allowed to join the YMCA because of his skin color, but the Y in Worcester admitted him, and working out there helped him develop the upper body strength to match his formidable leg power.

Back in Indianapolis in 1896, Taylor unofficially broke two world track records, for paced and unpaced 1-mile rides. But his feat offended white sensibilities, and he was banned from that track.



Family portrait, taken in 1906 or 1907. *Photo: Taylor collection.*



By 1898, Major Taylor was an internationally famous star. This photo appeared on the cover of the premier French sports magazine, *La Vie au Grand Air*, November 1, 1898. *Library of Congress.*

Still, his speed proved he was ready to turn professional, and the LAW's Racing Board in New York, where the color line had been opposed, agreed to register him as a pro.

His first pro race was one of the toughest, most controversial contests, a six-day race at Madison Square Garden in New York City. Begun in Britain in the days of the high-wheeled bicycle, the six-day was an agonizing endurance test: Individuals would ride almost continuously for six days and six nights, stopping only to eat or nap, covering as many miles as possible on a steeply banked indoor track.

Taylor's strategy was to ride for eight hours and sleep for one, and he succeeded in completing the race with that pattern, logging 1,732 miles. The crowd loved him, but he would never again ride an event of that length. His forté was sprinting.

The "colored cyclone," as the newspapers called him, competed fiercely on the national circuit in 1897 but had to abandon the quest for sprint points champion when

Southern race promoters refused him entry.

Hostility from white riders had gone from conspiratorial race tactics to threats to physical assault. One time, in Taunton, Mass., a competitor pulled Taylor from his bike and choked him into unconsciousness. The offender was slapped on the wrist with a \$50 fine, but Taylor didn't lose his nerve -- or his popularity. Some of the press condemned the racist treatment Taylor received, but some articles suggested he was to blame, saying white riders were understandably angered by his racing prowess and his failure to keep in his place.

The "Worcester Whirlwind" continued to win races nonetheless and set a 1-mile record in 1898 at age 19, clocking 1 minute, 41.4 seconds, paced, from a standing start. The next year he won the world championship at a 1-mile race in Montreal, his first time outside the United States. He



A rare action shot in Paris, 1903. Taylor comes from behind to contest a sprint with Harry Meyers of Holland and Thorwald Ellegaard of Denmark. The difference between Taylor's extended "modern" position and the contracted positions of the other two champions is clearly visible here. Photo: Jules Beau collection, Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris.



The integrated Boston pursuit team of 1897, left to right: Frank Butler, Burns Pierce, Major Taylor, Nat Butler, Eddie McDuffie. In Taylor's first season as a professional, he was on this team that raced against a team from Philadelphia in July 1897. This is possibly the earliest photo of an integrated American professional sports team. Photo appeared in *Bearings*, July 29, 1897, and is held in the Library of Congress.

was the second black world champion in any sport, following bantamweight boxer George Dixon's title fights in 1890-91 and preceding heavyweight boxer Jack Johnson by nine years. It would be nearly half a century before baseball's Jackie Robinson was integrated into the Brooklyn Dodgers.

Later the same season, Taylor knocked the 1-mile record down to 1:19, reaching 45.46 mph on a track in Chicago. The next season, in which Worcester opened a new track called the Coliseum, Taylor finally became American sprint champion.

Some of the racial hostility had receded, but when Taylor bought a house on Hobson Avenue in Worcester's well-to-do Columbus Park, the neighbors were upset. White residents offered to buy back the house for \$2,000 more than Taylor had paid. He refused. In the end, the neighborhood grew to accept its distinguished black resident, whose racing career made him one of the wealthiest blacks in the country.

Taylor embraced religion after his mother's death in 1898 and was a steadfast member of the John Street Baptist Church in Worcester. For years,

he resisted invitations to race in Europe because he refused to race on Sundays. He finally signed a European contract in 1901, was welcomed as a hero in France and proceeded to beat every European champion.

“Major Taylor had a proud and confident identity in Europe and was not a crushed or threatened black man,” Andrew Ritchie wrote in the 1988 biography “Major Taylor: The Extraordinary Career of a Champion Bicycle Racer,” which was republished in paperback in 1996 by Johns Hopkins University Press.

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Although the European press always made references to Taylor’s skin color, the labels were largely to give him a strong, recognizable identity, not to judge him or comment on his social standing. “For the first time in his life, it was an advantage for him to be black,” Ritchie wrote.

Taylor’s international fame grew with a two-year racing stint in Australia, followed by a two-year hiatus and then a brief comeback in 1907. He retired from racing in 1910 at age 32.

Taylor found little success in the business world, and various debts and serious illness sapped his fortune in the 1920s. Impoverished and estranged from his wife and daughter, Taylor headed to Chicago in 1930. He stayed at the YMCA and tried to sell copies of his self-published autobiography. His health deteriorated, and he died in 1932 in the charity ward of Cook County Hospital at age 53. He was buried in an unmarked pauper’s grave.



Publicity photo by E. Chickering of Boston, at the peak of Taylor’s American success in 1900. This appeared in *The Wheel*, July 5, 1900. *Library of Congress*.

Sixteen years later, a group of former pro bike racers, with money donated by Schwinn Bicycle Co. owner Frank Schwinn, had Taylor’s remains exhumed and placed in a more prominent part of Mount Glenwood Cemetery in Glenwood, Ill., with a bronze plaque that says:

“World’s champion bicycle racer who came up the hard way without hatred in his heart, an honest, courageous, and God-fearing, clean-living, gentlemanly athlete. A credit to his race who always gave out his best. Gone but not forgotten.”

Still, the steel grip of the automobile culture squeezed bicycling into the margins of American sport, and its heroes faded from memory.

As the centennial of Taylor’s world championship approached in the late 1990s, it was cyclists again who revived the legendary name. The nonprofit Major Taylor Association, Inc. (www.majortaylorassociation.org), based in Worcester, staged a series of community events to raise awareness and, with a state appropriation in 2006 topping off a \$250,000 fund drive, commissioned sculptor Antonio Tobias Mendez to create the Major Taylor statue.

Lynne Tolman, a cyclist and journalist in Worcester, Mass., is a board member of the Major Taylor Association.

Modern Day Major Taylor

Marshall W. "Major" Taylor (1878-1932) faced closed doors and open hostility with remarkable dignity in his quest to become the fastest bicycle rider in the world. To learn more, and spread the word, about the life and legacy of the 1899 world champion, visit www.majortaylorassociation.org for more information on the following.

- **George Street Bike Challenge for Major Taylor** -- uphill time trial July 29, 2007, in Worcester, Mass. See how fast you can pedal up a steep, short downtown street where Taylor trained. Entry fee is \$15. The contest is open to riders age 12 and up, on any type of bicycle. The distance is 500 feet; the average grade is 18 percent and the steepest part is closer to 24 percent. The challenge is presented by Barney's Bicycle and the Seven Hills Wheelmen and sponsored by Puma and the Telegram & Gazette. A Giant OCR3 road bike from Barney's Bicycle, Major Taylor cycling jerseys and other prizes will be raffled.
- **Major Taylor curriculum guide** -- free downloadable materials for teachers and youth group leaders, for Grades 3-4, Grades 5-8 and high school. The materials have been approved for Massachusetts Department of Education curriculum frameworks and have been used by teachers in more than two dozen states.
- **Major Taylor cycling jerseys, posters and books** -- available from the Donations page at www.majortaylorassociation.org. The 1992 made-for-TV movie "Tracks of Glory" is NOT available for sale or rental; it does air from time to time on cable TV.
- **"A Tribute to Major Taylor"** -- in bronze, granite and bluestone, by sculptor Toby Mendez (tobymendezstudios.com). The monument will be installed outside the Worcester Public Library, likely in late 2007. To be invited to the dedication, contact info@majortaylorassociation.org.

The Major Taylor Association has had a hand in numerous Major Taylor tributes locally and across the country. A sampling:

- **Major Taylor Boulevard** -- The name of Worcester Center Boulevard in downtown Worcester was changed in 2006 and dedicated to the champ.
- **LAW lifts racial ban** -- The League of American Bicyclists, successor to the 19th-century League of American Wheelmen, formally rescinded the LAW "color line" in 1999, decades after bike racing regulators dropped enforcement of the 1894 ban on blacks.
- **Major Taylor bike on display** -- A Peugeot that had belonged to Taylor and was donated to the U.S. Bicycling Hall of Fame was put on display at the ADT Event Center velodrome during the UCI Track Cycling World Championships in 2005 at The Home Depot Center outside Los Angeles.
- **Underground Railroad Bicycle Route** -- While the clandestine route for African-American freedom seekers was not a direct part of Major Taylor's experience, there is a connection with the 21st-century bike route developed by Adventure Cycling Association (www.adv-cycling.org) in partnership with the University of Pittsburgh's Center for Minority Health: Both the UGRR and the Major Taylor Association aim to involve more members of minority groups in bicycling.
- **Applebee's "hometown hero"** -- Major Taylor is featured as the "hometown hero" at the Applebee's Neighborhood Bar & Grill at 632 Park Ave., Worcester, with a wall display including an antique Iver Johnson bicycle. The restaurant opened in 2000.