

Against all odds New book celebrates the bright, shining life of Worcester’s Major Taylor

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When Marlene Targ Brill happened to drive by the Major Taylor Velodrome in Indianapolis, she wondered aloud, “Who’s Major Taylor and what’s a velodrome?” Her curiosity sparked, Brill soon became something of an expert on the history of bicycle racing and the life of Marshall “Major” Taylor, an African-American who was the world champion racer at the turn of the 20th century.

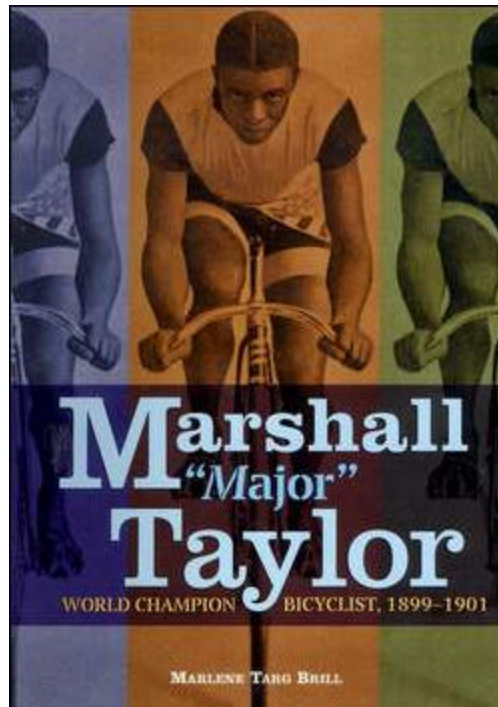
Brill, a prolific author of books for children and young adults, did a bit of research and soon added Taylor’s name to her list of potential biographical subjects. It hadn’t taken long for her to discover that Taylor, who was born and raised in Indianapolis, had faced down tremendous discrimination — including taunts and dirty tricks by white competitors on the racetrack — to gain his wealth and fame. And he had done it by turning the other cheek to his tormentors. In explaining himself in his autobiography, Taylor quoted Booker T. Washington: “I shall allow no man to narrow my soul and drag me down by making me hate them.”

Brill’s biography, “Marshall ‘Major’ Taylor: World Champion Bicyclist, 1899-1901,” was published in September by the Lerner Publishing Group as part of its Trailblazer Biographies series. The author will be in Worcester at the end of the month to talk to students in the public schools about her book and Taylor’s legacy. Taylor, after all, spent much of his adult life in the city and was known at the height of his fame as “The Worcester Whirlwind.”

Racing had taken Taylor from the U.S. to France and Australia. When he retired and returned to Worcester, his health declined and he suffered business reversals. Eventually, he moved to Chicago, where he died destitute in 1932 at the age of 53. He was buried in an unmarked grave. In 1948, a group of former professional bicycle racers, with money from Frank Schwinn, owner of Schwinn Bicycle Co., had Taylor reburied with a headstone that reads: *World’s champion bicycle racer — who came up the hard way — without hatred in his heart — honest, courageous and God-fearing, clean living, gentlemanly athlete, a credit to his race who always gave out his best — gone but not forgotten.*

It seemed that at one time Taylor had been largely forgotten in Worcester. Now, his legacy is widely celebrated in the city.

The Major Taylor Association (www.majortaylorassociation.org), which was formed 10 years ago, has made certain that the great cyclist is one of the city’s enduring historical figures. The association has sponsored more than 40 events to raise awareness. The annual George Street Bike Challenge honors the racer’s memory. In 2006, a section of Worcester Center Boulevard was renamed Major Taylor Boulevard.



Brill’s 112-page book recounts the story of Taylor’s life in a style suited to readers from 10 to 15.

Book signing by Marlene Targ Brill, author of “Marshall ‘Major’ Taylor”

When: 7 p.m. Nov. 27

Where: Worcester Public Library, 3 Salem Square

How much: Free and open to the public. Copies of the book will be available for \$20

And in the spring, a bronze, larger-than-life statue of Taylor by sculptor Antonio Tobias Mendez will be installed on the south side of the Worcester Public Library, the result of a fund-raising drive that brought in \$250,000 in private donations and a grant from the state.

The association has taken other steps, as well, in the conviction that education is the key to defeating racism and prejudice. The group introduced a curriculum guide for children in the early grades in the Worcester Public Schools; in 2005, the guide was expanded to include material for middle school students.

Written in a style suited to boys and girls from 10 to 15, Brill's 112-page book recounts the story of Taylor's life in a lively, detail-rich narrative accompanied by top-notch period photographs. The author sets the story in the context of the times and includes sidebars on pertinent topics, such as the start of bicycle racing in America and the change in women's lives when they flocked to the two-wheel mode of transportation. Brill provides an excellent capsule history of the Jim Crow laws, which codified the segregation of blacks in every area of life in parts of the United States and paved the way for lynchings and other acts of violence.

"You can talk about Jim Crow, slavery and discrimination, but if you can bring somebody to life who has been through it and talk through their voice, as I hope I was able to do, I think that makes a difference," Brill said by telephone from her home in Wilmette, Ill.

Lynne Tolman, a member of the board of the Taylor association, couldn't be more pleased that Brill has added to the small collection of volumes about Taylor. The city school system has purchased 100 copies of Brill's book through the Taylor association, using federal Title I reading/literacy funding.

"The Worcester Public Schools have been great with this," Tolman said. "They recognize a story they can really relate to. They've been eager to get this book into the schools."

Joan Fitton, manager of governmental relations/elementary initiatives, said that school officials look for books that are multicultural and provide positive models for children. "When it's as historically important a figure as Major Taylor, it's an obvious choice for Worcester schools," Fitton said.

On Nov. 27, Brill will give presentations to sixth-graders at Elm Park Community School and Chandler Elementary School. In the evening, she will sign copies of her book at the Worcester Public Library. The day's activities are sponsored by The Greater Worcester Foundation and AdventureCORPS.

"We are trying to focus on writing for students," Fitton said. "It helps them to meet a real writer. It's historically connected to Worcester, which makes it even more significant for the kids."

All told, Brill has authored 65 books for young people, among them a biography of U.S. Sen. Barack Obama.

She remarked that Taylor and Obama, who is seeking the Democratic nomination for president, share two characteristics — determination and intelligence.

"Major Taylor was phenomenally bright and talented," Brill said.

"He was determined to the point of being stubborn. He was driven. To his credit, he was almost an early Martin Luther King Jr."



Marlene Targ Brill



As a champion, Worcester's Marshall "Major" Taylor was a fierce competitor.