

## Library event focuses on famed bicyclist

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For the past 30 years, Andrew Ritchie has shared his life with Major Taylor.

Mr. Ritchie, a social and sports historian, is the author of the definitive biography of Marshall W. "Major" Taylor, the fastest bicycle rider in the world from 1898 to 1904, a time when cycle racing was hotter than baseball or football.

An African American, Taylor triumphed despite enormous prejudice. He was subjected to a constant stream of taunts, threats and dirty tricks by white competitors. Often asked how he managed to keep calm, Taylor would respond, "I merely ride away."

Taylor was religious and would wave the New Testament at his rivals, most likely to remind them that he lived by Jesus' teachings: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you and pray for those who abuse you.

Taylor, who lived in Worcester for many years, won hundreds of meets in the United States, Canada, Europe and Australia. In contrast to his homeland, he was highly revered in France, where he was treated like a celebrity.

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Andrew Ritchie,  
AUTHOR

"The long and short of Major Taylor in America is that it wasn't just a cycling struggle for him," Mr. Ritchie said. "It was a struggle for social recognition of any kind. He fought against prejudice and he won; with his allies, he forced his way into the sport. He was able to become American champion."

Mr. Ritchie started researching Taylor's life in the mid-1970s. His book, "Major Taylor: The Extraordinary Career of a Champion Bicycle Racer," was published in 1988, and the paperback edition came out eight years later. Mr. Ritchie regularly gets calls from people who have read the book. They want to tell him how much they like it, how it ought to be made into a movie.

"I've been talking to Hollywood for the last 15 years," Mr. Ritchie said from his home in El Cerrito, Calif. "The story has been optioned on a number of occasions. We did have various famous and unknown Hollywood people interested."

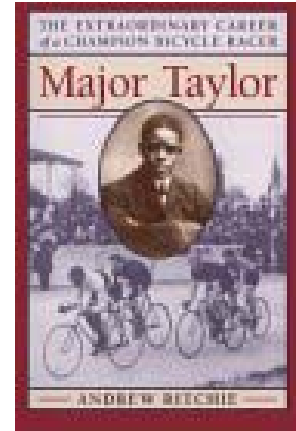
He is currently co-writing a script, and yet another Hollywood producer has expressed interest. "The general feeling seems to be that nothing is nailed down yet — but the time is right," Mr. Ritchie said.

Taylor was 16 when he moved to Worcester from Indiana with his employer and mentor, former racing star Louis "Birdie" Munger. At a time when Jim Crow segregation laws prevailed in many states, Munger, who opened a bicycle factory, realized that the East Coast would be more hospitable to Taylor's cycling ambitions.

"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."

A century after Taylor's glory days, he is not forgotten in his adopted city. Mr. Ritchie will present a slide show Thursday evening on the man who was often referred to as "the Worcester Whirlwind." The event will be held at the main branch of the Worcester Public Library.

Mr. Ritchie is the guest of the Major Taylor Association, which was formed in 1998 to ensure Taylor's legacy.



**Andrew Ritchie's Major Taylor Slide Show and Book Signing**

**When:** 7 p.m. Thursday

**Where:** Worcester Public Library,  
3 Salem Square, Worcester

**How much:** Free

The group intends to erect a statue of Taylor at the library. The statue has been designed by Antonio Tobias Mendez; the association has raised \$60,000 of the approximately \$250,000 cost. At Mr Ritchie's presentation, copies of his book will be for sale, as well as the Major Taylor posters designed by artist James Ransome.

State Sen. Harriette L. Chandler, D-Worcester, has backed the group's efforts, which, along with plans for the statue, include a curriculum on Taylor for third-graders. A professional educator is now developing a program for Grades 5 and 6.

"I have been sensitive to the fact that Major Taylor was a phenomenal athlete, and he represented minorities and didn't have the opportunity he would have today," Ms. Chandler said. "He lived in Worcester and gave prominence to a sport. It is something we should remember and celebrate."

To that end, Ms. Chandler has written into the Senate version of the proposed FY 2006 state budget \$205,000 to cover the balance of the cost of the statue.

"I think it's appropriate that the state help," she said. "This is a man who faced so much racial bias. Here was a city that welcomed him and celebrated his fame. This would be the first memorial to an African American in the city of Worcester."

In Mr. Ritchie's view, interest in Taylor is growing steadily. He had virtually been lost to history when he first captured Mr. Ritchie's attention in 1972. The writer happened to come across a copy of Taylor's autobiography. "I understood that this was a pretty extraordinary story," Mr. Ritchie said. He looked for more information on Taylor but could not find much.

Then a friend sent him a newspaper clipping about Sydney Taylor Brown, the famous cyclist's only child. She was living in Pittsburgh. He tracked her down. She talked about her recollections and gave him access to her father's scrapbooks.

Mr. Ritchie conducted research in a variety of locations, including Worcester and Chicago, where Taylor died a pauper in 1932, at the age of 53. Mr. Ritchie approached publishers for an advance to give him time to write the biography. He got no takers.

"All the material sat in a box under my bed for a long time," he said. "Finally, I was able to get Bicycle Books in San Francisco interested, and they were the ones who eventually gave me an advance and published the hard cover."

In Mr. Ritchie's view, Taylor's legacy has benefitted substantially from the soaring interest in the sport of cycling that started in the 1980s and continues today. Mr. Ritchie noted the tremendous growth in cycling clubs and the bicycle industry in the U.S. Always popular in Europe, cycling in America came to widespread public attention with the Tour de France victories of Greg LeMond and Lance Armstrong, who has won the grueling race six times.

The other critical change has been the racial integration of big-time sports, and the towering achievements of African-American athletes.

"I think there's been a big opening and willingness to recognize African Americans," Mr. Ritchie said. "If ever there were an athletic star who deserves recognition, it is Major Taylor."

Mr. Ritchie's book remains in print, and, he said, and the publisher, Johns Hopkins University Press, is talking about issuing an updated, deluxe edition.

"Major Taylor already is renowned as a historical figure," Mr. Ritchie said. "Anyone who gets seriously involved in cycling these days, before very long will hear of Major Taylor. Many cycling clubs have taken inspiration from him. I think that's something he would really be pleased with."



Major Taylor, on bicycle at left.