

Major effort

Cyclists challenge hill to honor famous athlete

By Priyanka Dayal
TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

WORCESTER— “Go, SpongeBob SquarePants!” came the announcer’s voice, as 10-year-old Jesse T. Colman pushed off with his left foot and began pedaling up the George Street hill.

Wearing a jersey picturing the familiar image of cartoon character SpongeBob, Jesse cycled up the incline in 51 seconds. Not bad for a novice competitor.

Jesse, of Shrewsbury, was the youngest of more than 100 cyclists competing yesterday in the Major Taylor Association’s George Street Bike Challenge, in which participants were ranked by how fast they could pedal up one of the city’s steepest inclines.

George Street is a rutted, narrow one-way that rises at an 18 percent grade and connects Main and Harvard streets. The 500-foot-long street was once frequented by cycling champion Marshall W. “Major” Taylor, a Worcester resident who became one of the world’s first black sports stars at the turn of the 20th century.

Normally the George Street Bike Challenge is only open to riders 12 and older. But Jesse’s parents, who also raced yesterday, convinced organizers that their son was up to the challenge.

When Jesse’s father, Paul T. Colman, suggested to Jesse that he enter the uphill race, he was reluctant.

“First I said no, then I said yes,” he said.

What changed his mind? The thought of “cheering crowds, and maybe a medal.”

Jesse’s mother, Linda J. Colman, said she and her husband have been cycling together since they started dating 14 years ago. After Jesse was born, they sometimes rode a tandem bike, she said, pulling a trailer with their toddler son seated inside.

The Colmans, who like to plan their family vacations around the best bike routes, scaled the George Street hill many times to prepare for the race.

“We came here before we went to church on Sundays,” Mrs. Colman said. “Hills are a good challenge. They build up strength.”

To the blare of an air horn, cyclists yesterday set off from the bottom of George Street. Spectators lining the street cheered as the racers, with gritted teeth and calf muscles tensing, struggled to pedal a straight course up the hill, under a balloon archway and through the finish line. By 10 a.m., when the racing started, the sun was hot enough to make them sweat even before they mounted their bikes.

Most of the racers, who ranged in age from 10 to 72, competed in individual time trials. A few tandem bikes



Bob Cooney of Oxford grimaces yesterday during the George Street Bike Challenge for Major Taylor. (T&G Staff Photos/CHRISTINE PETERSON)



Jesse T. Colman, 10, of Shrewsbury, digs in yesterday on the toughest part of the incline. His parents, Linda and Paul Colman, also made the climb.

and one triplet were in the mix.

Charles F. Planck and his daughters, Amanda, 12, and Isabel, 9, rode the only triplet bike in the competition, crossing the finish line in a speedy 48 seconds.

"I don't think (my daughters) liked it," Mr. Planck said, "but they were pleased when they were done. We have a hill like this near our home in Natick. We go up it as much as we can."

Of course, riding around their neighborhood on a bike with three seats and six pedals, the Plancks don't look quite like the average cycling enthusiasts.

"People know who we are," Mr. Planck said. "We get a lot of comments, and 90 percent of them are really, really nice."

Eric de Rivera of West Boylston was another father competing yesterday whose zeal for cycling has translated to his children.

Mr. de Rivera, who is 50, had the best time in the category of men age 50 to 59. He completed the grueling course in less than 25 seconds. He was still panting several minutes after he crossed the finish line, as his 12-year-old son, John Henry lauded his speed.

"Every instant, I'm going as hard as I can," said Mr. de Rivera, who said he bikes about 150 miles each week. "The last five seconds are a bit of a struggle, but it's OK, because it's the end."

With almost no training, John Henry was able to make it up the hill in 48 seconds, ranking fifth of riders age 12 to 15. But he said he would rather ride downhill.

"I like uphill," his father countered. "They give you a challenge."

Clad in cycling gear and leaning on the handlebars of his bicycle near the finish line, 58-year-old Alex V. Lorincz of Worcester looked like one of the competitors. Although he has tackled the hill before, yesterday it was just too daunting. So he opted to watch the racers instead.

"Three years ago I tried it, and I couldn't even come up the hill," he said. "This year I practiced. It took me 54 seconds."

Mr. Lorincz said he will compete next year, if he can lower his time to less than 50 seconds.

Yesterday was the Major Taylor Association's sixth annual bike challenge. The nonprofit group collected \$15 from riders to add to the hundreds of thousands of dollars it has already raised to fund construction of a statue of Major Taylor outside the Worcester Public Library. Groundbreaking for the \$250,000 statue was last month.

Contact Priyanka Dayal by e-mail at pdalay@telegram.com.



Tandem cyclists Kathleen and Joseph Marino work their way up the hill.



Lynn Cooney of Oxford keeps her eye on the prize near the finish line.