

Seventh annual George Street Bike Challenge

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'Major' hill climb Cyclist's great-great-grandson in race

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WORCESTER— When Marshall W. "Major" Taylor was biking up George Street during his training rides, he probably never imagined that 100 years later there would be an annual race there in his honor.

But there is.

The seventh annual George Street Bike Challenge was held yesterday. Nearly 150 participants rode up the hill on all kinds of bicycles, including a trio of tandem riders and a triplet team made up of a father and two daughters, all in honor of Worcester's own sports superstar, Major Taylor.



Michael Cole runs up George Street yesterday, cheering on Ronald Goguen as he grinds his way to the top during the seventh annual George Street Challenge. (ED COLLIER)

The steep George Street is nestled at the north end of Main Street, opposite the new courthouse. Participants in the challenge bike up the two-block hill one at a time, racing against the clock.

The short distance — 500 feet — is deceiving. Uphill the whole way, the 18 percent average grade is called the "quad buster."

As a fundraiser for the Major Taylor Association, proceeds from the race have been used to fund the statue that was erected in Major Taylor's honor in front of the Worcester Public Library and unveiled at a ceremony in May.

Major Taylor was represented well, as his great-great-grandson Thomas Clarke, 12, took his first ride up the hill in just over a minute.

"It was pretty cool," Thomas said. "I'm glad Major Taylor is getting recognized for all he did."

Thomas' mother, Jan Brown, said she was thrilled with the race.

“I really enjoy the way the community is choosing to celebrate Major Taylor as a living legacy,” she said.

Race director Peter Howard, who first imagined the George Street Challenge, said he was very proud of the event.

“It’s a really fun event,” he said. “It’s a citizen event — anybody can take the challenge, not just serious cyclists. You have the racers and you have the bikers in gym shorts and flip flops, and everyone in between.”

It was a day for the racers, when Robert Cooney of Oxford set the bar high with a time of 24.91 as the second rider of the day. Mr. Cooney, who beat his time from last year by more than a second, placed third in his division (Men’s 35-49) this year and eighth overall. Last year he finished second in his division.

Mr. Cooney’s time stood as the time to beat until rider number 65, first-time rider Eric Brassell, beat him by six-tenths of a second.

“I live on a steep hill in Arlington,” Mr. Brassell said. “I’m trying to get back into it (biking).”

Mr. Brassell finished third overall with a time of 24.31, and first in the Men’s 35-49 division.

Rich Hollenbeck, 23, of Wallingford, Conn., set a new course record of 22.83 — the only time of less than 23 seconds ever recorded.

Lynne Tolman, race administrator, said several other course records were broken.

“All three medalists in the Men’s 35-49 category broke the previous course record for that age group. Michael Cole, silver medalist in that category this year, set the previous record of 25.28 for that category in 2006,” she said. “John Paré broke his own record (set in 2007) for men 60 and older. His time today was 34.38.

“Women 50-plus was a new category this year. In previous years, they were (included) in with women 35-plus. While we’ve had women 50 and older competing in past years, none went as fast as Deb Jones Bachrach went today, so her 45.12 is a course record for the category,” Ms. Tolman said. “And Zachary Angelo (25.81) broke the record for juniors 15 and under.”

It was also a day for families. Ronald Goguen, 43, of Hopedale and three of his sons, all members of the Minuteman Road Club, competed in their first challenge. As his son Peter, 12, was pumping it toward the finish line, Mr. Goguen was cheering, “Go Peter! Come on — beat me!”

And he did. Peter's time was 34.16, compared with his father's 35.63.

"They all beat me," Mr. Goguen said. "They all did good, and for their age groups, they did very good. If they'd practiced, they've done better."

Peter's older brother, Manny, 17, finished sixth overall, with a time of 24.62. Tom Goguen, 14, placed third in the junior division, with a time of 30.31.



Spectators cheer competitors yesterday during the seventh annual George Street Bike Challenge. (ED COLLIER)

The Colman family of Shrewsbury also competed. Paul Colman, 53, finished with a 35.25, an improvement over last year's 35.87. His wife, Linda, finished with a 52.22.

Their son Jesse, 11, who was the race's youngest competitor last year, took 10 seconds off his time, finishing with a 41.63.

"His goal was to beat Mom," Mr. Colman said. "He almost beat me — I won't be able to hold him off for too much longer."

Greg Straight Edge, 34, of Brooklyn, N.Y., competed on a fixed gear, no brake bike, and finished with a time of 38.84. "I like that bike because it's simpler," he said. "I know myself and it's easier to be one with the bike."

Mr. Edge's time was a pleasant surprise.

"When I practiced, I was doing around 43 (seconds), so I'm very pleased. Next year, I'll be the youngest in my age group."

Ms. Tolman said every biker who competed actually made it to the top of the hill.

"We were also very pleased that there were no DNFs today. In bike racing that stands for 'Did Not Finish.' Probably more DNFs on this hill in past years have been mechanical failures, as opposed to riders who just couldn't muscle their way to the top, but still it's notable that everyone who raced today conquered the hill," she said.

Ms. Tolman said she was happy to see so many people come out to race and to support the racers.

"I'm thrilled that so many people are inspired by Major Taylor and willing to put in a real effort to honor him," she said.