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Francis ‘‘Jesse’’ Owens, 95, of Worcester, spoke of Major Taylor as racers competed in time trials. (Matthew J. Lee/ Globe Staff)

A black athlete changed the gears of cycling's world

After a century, ‘Worcester Whirlwind’ honored

By Peter Schworm, Globe Staff

WORCESTER -- He was a fin-de-siècle Lance Armstrong, celebrated in the streets of Paris for his blinding speed and his unflinching endurance. He was a black world champion, a decade before legendary heavyweight boxer Jack Johnson. He was an athletic prodigy akin to Tiger Woods, a quietly defiant racial pacesetter almost a half-century before Jackie Robinson broke baseball's color line.

His name was Major Taylor , one of the world's greatest cyclists during the sport's heyday at the beginning of the 20th century, when people would flock to velodromes by the thousands to see the “Worcester Whirlwind" outpedal white competitors for lucrative purses.

But when Taylor retired from competitive cycling in 1910, his fame and fortune disappeared rapidly. He died penniless at the height of the Depression, and was buried in an unmarked grave.

That obscurity would persist for decades, his trail-blazing career all but forgotten outside of cycling and civil rights historians.

Now, in his adopted Massachusetts hometown, where Taylor achieved his greatest prominence, a grass-roots coalition of cyclists, African-American leaders, and educators are rescuing Taylor's legacy and acclaiming his accomplishments anew.

Today, the city will rename part of a major downtown road, Worcester Center Boulevard, to Major Taylor Boulevard.

Educators have expanded a history curriculum about Taylor to all grade levels, so that more students will learn about his life. And work has begun on a long-awaited Taylor statue in front of the public library, the first city monument to honor an African-American individual.

Yesterday, as the Tour de France concluded on the Avenue des Champs-Elysées in Paris, racers churned up George Street, one of Worcester's steepest grades, where Taylor once trained, at an annual time trial in his name.

Lynne Tolman , a cyclist and member of the Major Taylor Association, a nonprofit group that has been working to honor Taylor, said that bringing his life out of the shadows does his legacy justice.

“He broke the color barrier in sports 50 years before Jackie Robinson, but very few people know his name," Tolman said. “We think it's sad that such a trailblazer has largely been forgotten."

A brilliant tactician blessed with a furious closing burst, Taylor overcame systemic bigotry, gang tactics, and even death threats from other racers to become a wealthy, world-renowned star.

A proud, religious man who refused to race on Sundays, he absorbed the slurs stoically, relying on his breakaway speed to prove his worth and shatter the myth of black inferiority.

“He met closed doors and open hostility with remarkable dignity," Tolman said. “He was a proud, principled man, a gentleman who knew he had to let his legs do his talking. He just wanted to race fair and square."

In his 1928 autobiography, published four years before his death, “The Fastest Bicycle Rider in the World," Taylor wrote that he always “played the game fairly and tried my hardest, although I was not always given a square deal or anything like it."

Despite “the bitterness and cruel practices of the white bicycle riders," and those who “bitterly opposed me and did everything possible to injure me and prevent my success," Taylor wrote that “life is too short for a man to hold bitterness in his heart."

An Indiana native, Taylor worked for a bicycle maker as a teenager and honed his skills riding to work 25 miles each way. He began entering races, but faced sharp resistance from the white riders, who warned him not to compete and conspired against him. In 1895, he moved to Massachusetts to compete in a more racially tolerant climate, although he was attacked in Taunton and choked until he fell unconscious.

Taylor turned pro at age 18 and made a rapid ascent to the elite ranks of the sport, becoming in 1899 the second black athlete in any sport to hold a world title. At one point he held seven world records and ranked as the country's most famous athlete, said Andrew Ritchie , author of “Major Taylor: The Extraordinary Career of a Champion Bicycle Racer." Taylor then raced throughout Europe and Australia and was the first black athlete to earn world fame.

“He was lionized in Paris," Ritchie said. “The crowds turned out just to watch him train."

Taylor wanted to show the world, particularly blacks, that they could overcome obstacles with discipline and perseverance.

Breaking into cycling at the time was a particularly daunting achievement, Ritchie said.

“Jackie Robinson was a single individual breaking into a segregated sport," he said. “Taylor was different. He was challenging the white structure of the sport and saying: ‘Let me in. I want to compete on equal terms.' "

But his fame and fortune proved fleeting, and Taylor today is largely unknown outside a core of cycling enthusiasts.

Robert Thomas , who runs The Martin Luther King Jr. Business Empowerment Center in Worcester, said the tributes to Taylor will help dispel negative stereotypes about minorities and will give young African-Americans, who make up about 7 percent of the city's population, a hometown hero to admire.

A Taylor great-granddaughter, Jan Brown , 46, said Taylor was a singularly focused individual who loved cycling and competition. But his legacy extends beyond athletics, she said.

“His life was about pursuing excellence, about defining his goals and going after them," she said. “He was an inspirational figure."

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