

BOOKS

## Vicious Cycle

**A local black athlete's stunning skills stirred the cruelty and eventual neglect of a racist age**

**Major: A Black Athlete, a White Era, and the Fight to Be the World's Fastest Human Being,**

By Todd Balf

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By Kenneth J. Cooper

Nearly a century before Michael Jordan, there was another African-American athlete whose powerful jump dominated a sport and captivated fans worldwide. Only this spectacular superstar did it while remaining very much earthbound.

His name was Marshall Walter Taylor, and in the tortured annals of American sport and race, his seminal feats have remained overlooked.

Cycling was his game at the dawn of the 20th century, when that form of racing replaced the horses as the national pastime for a brief interlude until baseball took hold of the country's imagination.

The bicycle was still new then. From its rubber wheels, Taylor stroked so much speed that one of his records has been nicked by only a half-second, despite the many advances in technology and training regimens since his day. Not bad for the son of slaves who was born in Indianapolis, grew wealthy for a time, and lived for most of his racing career and part of his retirement in nearby Worcester.

From Todd Balf, the Beverly author of a bestseller about a whitewater expedition in the Himalayas, Taylor gets his due in a suspenseful narrative that pumps up the drama of big competitions won and lost. He set seven world records for various distances, took the world championship in 1899, and held the nation's in 1900.



*Marshall Walter Taylor around his 20th birthday, 1898, when he shocked the cycling world with his record speed trial in Philadelphia*

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Balf credits the cyclist with some firsts bigger than his own sport. He was "the first black man to hold a major sports world title" - nine years before Jack Johnson won the heavyweight boxing championship - and "the first American sports celebrity."

It was Taylor who drew big crowds for "the first international sporting spectacle," a series of match-ups in Australia against a white American rival that presaged the racial context of Johnson's title bouts. The charged competition between Taylor and Floyd McFarland, Balf reports, left such an enduring impression in the land down under that it accounts for cycling's popularity in that country to this day.

The story of Taylor's life weaves its way to the showdown with McFarland. It wasn't their first, just the biggest.

Taylor and McFarland knew each other as top cycling rivals. Their relationship, though, was nothing like the friendship that evolved decades later between Joe Louis and Max Schmeling.

McFarland, born in San Jose, Calif., was a racist who colluded with other white cyclists to keep Taylor at the back of the track, if not off it altogether. They would bunch around him so he had no room for the dazzling acceleration, or "jump," that amazed spectators and sportswriters. McFarland organized a breakaway racing circuit and probably used his influence to shift the world championships to Sundays, when Taylor didn't compete because he was a devout Christian.

Balf plumbs the broader racial climate that surrounded Taylor's career, noting that in the year of his world championship, for instance, the

country set a record for lynchings. Also explored is why and how he could be so popular with white fans in the Jim Crow era. A black athlete was acceptable because whites attributed his ability to genetic physical attributes, not mental abilities - a sentiment many would say has yet to see its last day.

Curiously, among African-Americans, Taylor never had the appeal of boxers Johnson or Louis. Balf casts Taylor as a Jackie Robinson who almost always nursed the wounds of racism in self-possessed silence. But Robinson became a black hero, and Taylor didn't.

Tapping the voluminous notes and scrapbooks the cyclist kept and the autobiography he wrote, Balf outlines the contours of Taylor's racial consciousness. He identified more with Booker T. Washington, the accommodator, than W.E.B. Du Bois, the activist. Both black leaders claimed him, but Balf suggests when his wounds hurt the most Taylor was drawn to Du Bois.

Some readers may want to know more about Taylor's sense of racial identity, in his own words. Many may yearn for more outrage from Balf when he writes about the worst instances of racist cruelty, which are rendered too much as "that's the way it was."

Balf does get his racial history right, and sensitively so, except for a lapse or two. For instance, he envisions Taylor's father gathering with fellow Civil War veterans of the US Colored Troops. As an escaped slave, his father would have been a "contraband" soldier, not regular Army. That is the reason there appears to be no record of his military service, a fact that seems to bewilder Balf.

Beyond sport and race, there is national and regional history in Balf's telling of Taylor's story. Madison Square Garden, at least in its second incarnation, was built specifically for bicycle races. The motorcycle was invented as a pace vehicle to lead cyclists to higher speeds. The Springfield maker of the famous Indian motorcycle originally produced bikes. As a teenager, Taylor moved to Worcester because his white trainer was striving to build a faster bicycle in a factory there. There were velodromes in the Back Bay, Taunton, and Cambridge, whose Charles River Race Track was the site of the first professional sprint race. The former Necco Candy Factory stands there now.

Taylor raced at the tracks in Cambridge and Taunton. In 1897, he finished second in Taunton behind McFarland and was set upon by the third-place finisher, who choked Taylor unconscious.

The house where he lived is still on Hobson Avenue in Worcester. A memorial statue of Taylor is being erected outside the city's public library, partially with state funding. In 1989, he was admitted to the US Bicycling Hall of Fame.

He deserves still more recognition. Balf's title comes from Taylor's nickname, given to him as a boy for wearing a uniform while performing stunts outside a bike shop in Indianapolis to drum up customers. The locals called him Major. And what he accomplished was too.

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