Racism followed Taylor abroad

By Pamela H. Sacks
SPECIAL TO THE TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

Marshall W. “Major” Taylor has become a familiar historic figure in Worcester. The city has a Major Taylor Boulevard, and a bronze statue honoring “the Worcester Whirlwind,” as he was known, stands next to the Worcester Public Library.

Taylor, an African-American, was the top professional bicycle racer at the start of the 20th century, when the sport was most popular in the world. He won staggering amounts of money while drawing tens of thousands of spectators to races in North America, Europe and Australia.

Taylor earned the nickname “Major” as a kid when he performed bike tricks in a military uniform in front of a bicycle shop in Indianapolis. He moved to Worcester with the shop owner, who had taken an interest in the talented cyclist. Taylor made the city his home for much of his adult life.

Taylor’s athletic achievements were impressive, to say the least. But what made him even more remarkable was his capacity to rise above abhorrent treatment at the peak of vicious, segregationist Jim Crow laws in the United States. Taylor was heckled and hounded and even physically attacked. He was turned away from restaurants and hotels from coast to coast, subjected to dirty tricks by racist competitors and banned from Southern tracks. In Atlanta he was told to get out of town within 48 hours — or else. Yet he was so big a draw at competitions that cycling promoters had no choice but to invite him to participate.

Since the 1980s, Taylor’s life and legacy have come to light through a full-length biography, a children’s book and numerous newspaper stories and columns. This year, a new book, “Major Taylor in Australia,” by Jim Fitzpatrick, highlights Taylor’s experiences Down Under.

Reinstating Taylor to his rightful place in history has not been easy. The Major Taylor Association, a Worcester organization, campaigned for both the renaming of the boulevard and the monument to Taylor. On Sunday, the group will hold its 10th annual competition in Taylor’s honor — the George Street Bike Challenge for Major Taylor.

Mr. Fitzpatrick, an American living in Australia, ran into a four-hour miniseries and shown on ABC-TV before the 1992 Olympics. Yet Mr. Fitzpatrick still could not find a publisher for his book, so he put it aside. Last year, when he started his own publishing company, Star Hill Studio, he dusted off the manuscript and published “Major Taylor in Australia.”

The 188-page book recounts in detail two racing seasons that Mr. Fitzpatrick views as a turning point in Taylor’s life. It is filled with period photographs of nearly all the key people in the story as well as wonderful street scenes of Australian cities, cycle tracks and hordes of racing fans.

“It was a bit of a mission that the book would be out there, and people could read about a truly great person,” Mr. Fitzpatrick said.

Taylor already had endured years of what he called “the dreadful monster prejudice” by the time he agreed to race in Australia. In fact, he had decided not to compete in the United States anymore because, as Mr. Fitzpatrick wrote, “the situation had become intolerable.”

Taylor’s first season in Australia was largely a triumph. He competed against the best Australians, drew massive crowds and won large sums of money.

Thrilled with the success, promoters decided to up the ante for the next year and invited Americans Floyd McFarland and Iver Lawson, among the best cyclists in the world and known to be rabid racists, to participate. McFarland had vowed to drive Taylor from the racing scene. Lawson was his protege. They already had proved to be an explosive combination.

In Mr. Fitzpatrick’s view, it will never be known whether Taylor knew that McFarland and Lawson would be racing. In any event, he signed on, and Mr. Fitzpatrick lays out the ugly details of what occurred, describing rigged races and dirty tricks in hard-fought competitions that ended in a ruined season for Taylor.

Through it all, Taylor, who at one point was badly injured, held his tongue. Mr. Fitzpatrick said that in combing the newspapers and magazines of the era he found just one instance in which Taylor expressed bitterness. “Some of your officials have all along entertained a disgusting prejudice against me ... they have regarded me merely as a revenue earning machine; nothing more. My, I could fill your pa...

George Street Bike Challenge for Major Taylor

Where: Main and George streets, Worcester
When: 10 a.m. Sunday
What: Cyclists compete to see who can pedal the fastest up the steep hill. Major Taylor used as a training ground when he was the world champion in 1899.
How much: Entry fee $20; contest open to riders age 12 and older. Register at www.majortaylorassociation.org. Proceeds go to the association.

At left, Eric Brassell of Arlington was last year’s overall race winner with a time of 23.22.
Jim Fitzpatrick read from his book, “Major Taylor in Australia,” during a visit to Worcester last month.

Taylor at Australia

Major Taylor with his wife, Daisy, and daughter, Sydney.

Last month, Mr. Fitzpatrick toured the United States to talk about his book. He visited a number of cycle clubs, several of them named for Major Taylor. He discovered that few members knew much about the man who was once the most popular athlete in the world.

“Taylor broke the racial barrier in professional bicycle racing in 1896, five decades before Jackie Robinson did it in baseball,” Mr. Fitzpatrick said. “I often say Major Taylor broke the color barrier in America — but they slammed the door right behind him.”

“Major Taylor in Australia” is available on Amazon.com and at www.starhillstudio.com.au in print and e-book forms.

Submitter Photo

Taylor at the Sydney Cricket Ground.