

**SPORTS**

# Doyel: Racism broke him, but Indianapolis cycling superstar Major Taylor is getting his moment

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Published 5:15 a.m. ET Jul. 1, 2021 | Updated 7:54 a.m. ET Jul. 1, 2021

INDIANAPOLIS – History is happening down the street. No, not that way on Meridian. This way: Heading north from Georgia Street, crossing Maryland, and now turning right onto Pearl Street. Yes, Pearl Street is really just an alley. What, you think the path into history should be beautiful?

Not this path.

Turn onto the alley, pass the Dumpster on the left, and keep walking under the fire escape snaking down from that big red brick building. There's a man sitting under the fire escape, next to the police car parked there. Could be related. Not our problem. Keep walking until you can turn left.

Now look up.

There you go. There's your beauty, high up on the wall of the Barnes & Thornburg building.

Once upon a time, before he died penniless in a Chicago hospital charity ward, before he was given a pauper's burial, Major Taylor was the fastest man alive. That's what people called him, because it was true. He was from Indianapolis – also true – and was world famous. This was the turn of the century, right around 1900, and more things happened. History happened, and no, history isn't always beautiful.

But there he is now, towering over Meridian Street, his mural being painted 60 feet above downtown Indianapolis. It isn't finished yet, but already there is so much power here as Major Taylor explodes off the building, leaning over the handlebars, his red racing jersey leaving behind a crimson trail.

This is Major Taylor's moment. Considering he was once the fastest man alive, it's taken him an awfully long time to get here.

## **Whoopi Goldberg eyes Major Taylor story**

He's had moments before, hints and teases, that have led us here. The Major Taylor Velodrome was the biggest moment, the racing facility built just north of Marian University for the 1982 U.S. Olympic Festival; it was named in his honor. That was nearly a century after he set his first world record – he once held seven of them, simultaneously – and the Indianapolis News story about the velodrome quoted a member of the Mayor's Bicycle Task Force with regret.

“He was an athlete who has such a great record,” Fred Evans told the newspaper on May 28, 1982, “but he is a forgotten page in history.”

History tried to remember, it really did. Well, sort of. In 1989, the IndyStar reported, there were three Major Taylor movies in the works: a made-for-TV miniseries from “Terms of Endearment” producer Martin Jurow; another TV miniseries, this one by Orion Pictures said to be starring “The Cosby Show's” Malcolm Jamal-Warner (he played Theo); and a feature film produced by Whoopi Goldberg, who purchased the movie rights for Andrew Ritchie's 1988 book, “Major Taylor: The Extraordinary Career of a Champion Bicycle Racer.”

Alas, no movie was made.

This is Major Taylor's story.

He was born Marshall W. Taylor in Indianapolis on Nov. 26, 1878, the son of a Civil War veteran of the Union army, one of Gilbert and Saphronia Taylor's eight children. By age 13

he was performing bicycle tricks outside the Hay & Willits sporting goods shop at 70 N. Pennsylvania, wearing a soldier's uniform and getting a nickname: Major.

Taylor won his first race against adults, a 10-mile event, at age 13 and caught the eye of Louis "Birdie" Munger, a world-class cyclist from Detroit who had relocated to Indianapolis that year to capitalize on the national biking craze. This was before the NBA and NFL, when the best cyclists were nearly as famous and well-compensated as champion boxers, and Birdie Munger joined the race to build lighter, safer racing bikes. By 1895 Indianapolis had become a hub of bicycle manufacturers, with nine factories employing almost 1,500 people.

Major was doing tricks outside Hay & Willits and working as a riding instructor for Harry Hearsey, who had the city's first bicycle shop, at Delaware and New York. He was 14, a prodigy, and Birdie Munger wanted to get him out of Indianapolis, according to investigative reporter Michael Kranish's 2019 book about Taylor, "The World's Fastest Man."

The racism was so suffocating, Mayor Taylor entered one race coated in lotion in an effort to appear white. He entered another race at the last moment, emerging from bushes near the starting line. In 1895, he and Munger moved to Worcester, Mass.

Understand the times: In 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld racial segregation in its "separate but equal" ruling in Plessy v. Ferguson. When Taylor returned to Indianapolis for an event in 1896, he set the one-mile record at the Capital City Track, which then refused to let him race there anymore. So did the Newby Oval, built in 1898 at Central Avenue and 30th Street.

Unable to race at home, Taylor toured Europe and broke world records. At 22 he was going from country to country, taking on the fastest racer there in \$10,000 match races, and winning. Thousands of fans came to these velodromes to watch Taylor travel at speeds approaching 40 mph. He was rich, and he was famous.

And then he was neither.

## The decline was steep

Historians say it happened in 1904.

That's when Major Taylor began to break down under the weight of all that fame, pressure and prejudice. He was still living in Massachusetts, attempting various comebacks before retiring in 1910 at age 32, and then this man who had won so much began to lose: his wife, his fortune, his health.

Taylor's final effort to save himself, financially, was to write an autobiography, "The Fastest Bicycle Rider in the World," but he had to self-publish the book in 1928, and in doing so spent the last of his savings. In 1930 he moved into a YMCA rooming house in Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood, and in 1932 suffered a heart attack. He died on June 21, 1932, in the charity ward of Cook County Hospital, and then his body was lowered into an unmarked grave south of town at Mount Glenwood Memory Gardens.

That's where it stayed for 16 years until his body was exhumed in 1948 by a group of cycling enthusiasts. Major Taylor was relocated to a more prominent area of the cemetery, with a plaque honoring the "champion bicycle racer who came up the hard way without hatred in his heart."

A 1980 story in the Indianapolis News called Taylor "perhaps the most neglected figure in American sports." Then came the Major Taylor Velodrome in 1982, a few books, talk of movies, but by 2018 his story remained so elusive that Outside magazine wrote a story with this headline: "Why haven't you heard of Marshall 'Major' Taylor?"

But he's having a moment now, Major Taylor, one that started in earnest later in 2018 with a Hennessy commercial, of all things, narrated by the rapper Nas and celebrating Taylor's indomitable spirit. Michael Kranish's book was released the following year, and now this, the mural on the Barnes & Thornburg building.

The artist, Shawn Michael Warren, is a Chicago native who says he'd heard only vaguely of Major Taylor when the Arts Council of Indianapolis announced last year the city's Bicentennial Legends Mural Series, with Major Taylor the first mural. (You can nominate a legend here.) Warren was one of 54 artists from 21 states to apply – he's 33, a graduate

of the American Academy of Art in Chicago, and has studied at the Florence (Italy) Academy of Art – and he had to dig deep to learn the essence of Major Taylor.

“Aside from sport itself, he had a very tragic life, a very tragic ending to his life,” Warren says. “I wanted to work on restoring the dignity he wasn’t given in life, both in the sport and as an Indianapolis native. I wanted to focus more on dignifying him, rather than focusing on the egregious forms of racism he faced during his lifetime.”

You can find Warren five days a week on a boom lift outside the Barnes & Thornburg building, 60 feet above downtown Indianapolis. He’s painting the story of a world-class cyclist who had to leave Indianapolis to find his place in the sport, then had to leave the United States to find his fortune, and returned to America only to lose it all.

All these years later, Major Taylor is finally having his moment. May it last a while longer.

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