

Summer series: **Black sports stars** - Part 1 of 5

Through August 31, L'Equipe presents a weekly series. This week, we go back to one of the great pioneers of his time.

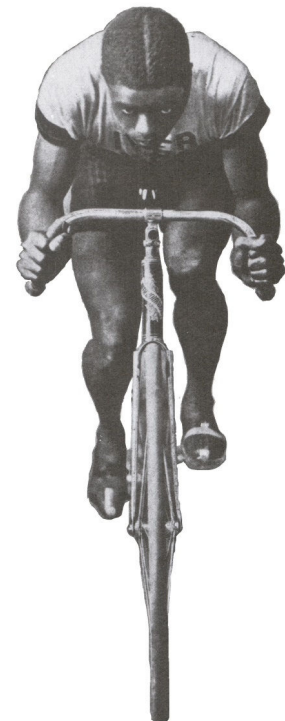
Major Taylor

So long forgotten

Track cycling world champion in 1899, he became the first international star of the sport. France almost adopted him.

By Celine Nony

A bit of bitterness? “No, I say it jokingly,” laughs Gregory Bauge, four-time world champion in the individual sprint.¹ “But it’s true that in 2009, I thought I had become the first black to win this title.” He quickly realized his mistake when the reference was pointed out: in 1899, the African-American Major Taylor had already been crowned world champion. The first of seven titles. “Our former mechanic, Jean Moiroud, told me a little bit about him,” admits Bauge. “But it was only after I received many messages, and even a biography of Major Taylor, sent from the United States, that I really understood something about him. His victories, his life, everything he did inside and outside his sport made me respect him greatly. I’ll take every opportunity I have to tell his story. We need to know these pioneers, to be inspired by them.”



If Taylor – that’s Marshall Walter, his real name – was Bauge’s processor, many people have in fact forgotten him. And for much too long. The Canadian boxer George Dixon is documented as the first “colored” world champion (1890), but the track rider remains the first black professional athlete who had international fame. Truly a star! When he was undertaking his European and Australian tours, Taylor was constantly under examination, a mixture of curiosity, fascination, and discomfort. The French took him under their wing, hungry for his appearances. Crowds jammed into the velodromes to see him, the ovations were huge, and a media whirlwind surrounded him soon as he set foot in France.

“It was so unexpected to find the hundreds of articles about him in the French press, especially in *Le Velo*, *L’Auto*, and *La Vie au Grand Air*,” remembered Andrew Ritchie, author of a biography of Taylor published in 1988.² “I first came upon his name in 1975, but there was no internet in those days. I

¹ 2009, 2010, 2012, 2015.

² *Major Taylor – The Extraordinary Career of a Champion Bicycle Racer*

researched Major Taylor for about 10 years in libraries and recorded interviews with his daughter, Sydney Taylor Brown, who lived to 100 years old. But it was in Paris that I discovered the impressive amount of press coverage and could reconstruct the chronology and understand his career," Ritchie continued. He found many articles, photos, hard-to-read microfilm, and even a biography written in 1904 by French journalists Paul Hamelle and Robert Coquelle.

Taylor was born in 1878 on a small property in the rural outskirts of Indianapolis. The farm was not big enough to support eight children so his father became the coachman for the Southards, an affluent family with whom young Marshall Walter lived from the age of about 8. He became a friend of the Southards' son, benefiting from the same education and wearing the same kind of clothes. This was a five-year experience that built his confidence and made him comfortable with the white bourgeoisie. When his benefactors moved, they gave him his own bicycle, a gift that determined his future. On his own, Taylor practiced this new game and revealed an incredible agility. He started to do tricks on his bike and attracted the attention of a bicycle dealer, Tom Hay, who hired him for a few dollars to dress in a soldier's costume and do tricks outside his shop for publicity. From that he got the nickname "Major." The same year, 1892, the teenager won his first race.

"Major Taylor? I'm a fan! His style on the bike, the bent elbows, his very aerodynamic position," gushes Florian Rousseau, three-time Olympic champion. "Both on the track and away from it, I find him impressive." While his opponents were very muscular, Major Taylor was a little fellow, 1.68 meters tall, rather thin but extremely fast. He caught the eye of a former champion, Louis Munger, who quickly took him under his wing. He became Taylor's mentor and his friend. With Munger, he made dazzling progress – too much perhaps for his own good.

It's hard to imagine the racism, the segregation that was the rule in the United States. Major Taylor was frequently fouled and harassed by his white opponents, ostracized and physically threatened with death in some states, and excluded from certain races. "The hostility, even the hate, that he faced in America deeply affected his career," says Andrew Ritchie. Meanwhile, his presence alone attracted huge crowds and doubled box-office receipts – a gift for the promoters. News of Major Taylor's victories and world records resounded throughout France, where people were crazy about cycling.

In the spring of 1900, the newspaper *Le Vélo* offered "the Flying Negro" \$10,000 - an extraordinary sum of money - if he would come to compete in Paris. Because he was a committed Baptist who refused to race on Sundays, Major Taylor turned down the invitation several times. But the persistence of Robert Coquelle, a retired bicycle racer, talented journalist and the director of the Buffalo Velodrome, eventually persuaded him to change his mind. A dozen reporters were waiting for the American star in Cherbourg when his ship arrived in March 1901. "To spice things up, the press billed the races as black vs. white," says Lynne Tolman, president of the Major Taylor Association in Worcester. "But in France, unlike in America, there was no hostility." But at a time when Raphael Padilla was popular as the illustrious clown "Chocolat," the French weren't reluctant to use stereotypes. They talked about his body like an anthropological specimen; they regarded this negro with something between admiration and patronizing colonialism. Some brought up a comparison to monkeys or savages, and they joked about his fondness for the number 13, which he preferred despite the American superstition.

"People were fascinated by him. Reporters waited for him in the morning outside the entrance of his hotel and followed him around asking questions. In an interview, Major Taylor told a reporter that 'what bothered (him) were the people who went right up to (him) and looked at (him) right in the eyes. Are blacks not seen in Paris?' " Andrew Ritchie reports.

On May 16, 1901, spectators crowded into the Parc des Princes for the first duel between Major Taylor and Edmond Jacquelin, reigning world sprint champion, who had won in 1900 - Major Taylor had chosen not to compete in that championship. Ten thousand tickets were sold, and almost as many people were forced to wait outside the stadium. The contest was for the best of three races and the visitor lost the first; but a mishap showed an image the French audience would love: Jacquelin's pedal broke and his opponent stopped to allow the heat to be re-run. His sportsmanship won them over.



Jean Catuffe/Getty Images

The match between Major Taylor, 1899 world champion, and the Frenchman Edmond Jacquelin, 1900 world champion, sold out the Park de Princes in Paris, on May 16, 1901. Jacquelin won, but in their next encounter the American would come out ahead.

“The French were surprised at his behavior, to see him so well dressed, his good manners, and he even decided to make a visit to the Louvre,” continued his biographer. “High society welcomed him and he was invited everywhere, including the Automobile Club of France.” One day, he came across Jacquelin in a bistro in the Bois de Boulogne. The Frenchman wanted him to have a drink and offered Taylor a glass of champagne. The American, who was a teetotaler as he was pious, would only drink a simple glass of water.

At the first re-match, on the following May 27, Major Taylor soundly defeated Jacquelin. And his successes built from there. His winnings, too. He would go on to profit from his talent, returning to France in 1902 and 1903, and then three more times in 1907 through 1909. But, after a break of more than two years, the successes of his later years were no longer quite as brilliant. He did have some bursts of success, defeating the 1907 world champion, the Dane Thorvald Ellegaard, in Marseille in 1907, and victories in Paris, Rouen and Roanne in 1908, but the promoters could no longer afford to pay such high appearance fees. Major Taylor retired in 1910, had setbacks in his business affairs, resided in Worcester [Massachusetts] and died in poverty and anonymity in Chicago in 1932, separated from his wife and daughter. “The end was very sad,” said Andrew Ritchie. “He had occasionally spoken about exiling himself in France, like the singer Josephine Baker and writer James Baldwin. Had he done so, his life might well have been a whole easier.”

And perhaps it would not have been such a long time before he was rediscovered. ■

“Ahead of his time”

EDWIN MOSES, double Olympic champion in the 400m sprint



The American former athlete memorializes Major Taylor.

(1976 and 1984)

and honorary national chairman of the Major Taylor Association

What is your connection to Major Taylor?

I discovered his story belatedly. When I started to look into it, a couple of books allowed me to understand the discrimination he suffered, which was then the norm in the United States. At the same time, he was an extraordinary champion, incredibly famous abroad, especially in France. One day I was contacted by a journalist, Lynne Tolman, the president of the Major Taylor Association, which she had helped found in 1998. She wanted me to help with fundraising. It took four years to raise the \$300,000 [257,000 Euros], but we succeeded in dedicating a monument in his honor in Worcester (Massachusetts) in 2008.

What does Major Taylor mean to you personally?

As well as being a champion, he was the quintessential cyclist. He was the first African-American to become not only a truly professional athlete but a truly international star. At the same time, he was confronted by terrible racism, he was insulted, physically attacked and threatened with death. At the time, the Ku Klux Klan was very active. In the United States, we know all about the problems other black athletes were subjected to: Jesse Owens in 1936, Jackie Robinson in 1947, Tommie Smith in 1968, Arthur Ashe and Muhammad Ali ... But everybody had forgotten about this famous cyclist who was a pioneer before them all. Finally, his name has been added to that list.

How do you explain this neglect?

He finished his career very early, in 1910, just before the First World War, which literally killed a whole generation. Plus, attention turned to other sports: basketball, baseball and American football.

At a personal level, what strikes you about him?

He was a man ahead of his time, a champion who was very advanced in his training and in terms of bicycle technology. He was a very dignified man who was not only able to fix his own bicycle, but also fought outrageous treatment. **C.N.**