

# Race under pressure: The story of champion cyclist 'Major' Taylor

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*Photo Courtesy of the  
Major Taylor Association*  
Marshall "Major" Taylor

By Laura Wareck  
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WORCESTER, Mass. - Supremely talented, but harassed and the target of racial discrimination.

Discounted, yet desperate to prove his worth in the world's most popular sport.

This is the story of Marshall "Major" Taylor, a black athlete who rose from virtually nothing to become the fastest cyclist in the world.

Even beyond that, this is the story of a man who transcended the sports threshold and left behind a legacy that still resounds on a profound cultural and social level.

Lynne Tolman, who is a board member of the Major Taylor Association — a Worcester group dedicated to educating others about Taylor's life and achievements — has been a cyclist for the past 20 years.

More than 10 years ago, she came across a few references to Taylor, who spent a good portion of his life living in Worcester. She soon became fascinated by his story. Taylor was an amazing sprinter — his speed often dazzled crowds — but it was his character and determination that really impressed Tolman.

"I think people are hungry for heroes, for role models, and here's a guy who quietly, powerfully stood up for what was right, against immense pressure," Tolman said. "For the most part, on the bike he let his legs do the talking."

Taylor was born in 1878, and rode his first bike as a young child, thanks to a white family he was friends with. At the age of 13, he won his first race. In 1898, he was clocked biking at 46 mph, while the swiftest car at the time managed only 39 mph. By 1898, he was world champion.

"Taylor set the gold standard for his generation," said Peter Nye, an author who has written a handful of books on cycling and its history.

Throughout his quest to become a world champion cyclist, Taylor faced immense jealousy, discrimination and even physical danger, both from other cyclists and the general public.

His infamous arch rival, Floyd McFarland, was once quoted as saying that when he saw Taylor approach, he didn't recognize his existence, according to Andrew Ritchie, who has written the definitive biography on the cycling star.

For the most part, Taylor handled the discrimination stoically, and in a reserved manner. Those who have written about him say it's because of his personality and the time period he lived in. According to Tolman, the 1890's saw more lynchings than any other decade.

"He was intelligent and realistic enough to understand that nothing good could come from a provocative attitude," Ritchie said. "He was threatened many times ... and attacked physically on the track ... and easily could have been dead."

'He was the first'

While other early black athletes — Jackie Robinson and boxer Jack Johnson among others — have been recognized for their accomplishments, Taylor has been largely ignored.

"The most important thing to understand about Taylor was that he was the first," said Todd Balf, an author whose book "Major" will appear on shelves later this spring. "You can't underestimate how difficult it is to be the first."

Balf is a longtime cyclist, and he was initially intrigued by Taylor's ability and success in the sports world. After doing some research, Balf quickly recognized that the story went beyond that.

"I discovered it wasn't merely a good and true sports story, but a great American story," he said. "I was hooked."

One of Tolman's favorite stories about Taylor was when he bought a house in the wealthy, white neighborhood of Columbus Park in Worcester. People didn't like it, and offered to buy the house from him, but Taylor refused. Local papers scolded the neighbors, who eventually came to accept Taylor's presence.

It was that type of unwavering strength that was typical of Taylor.

"His refusal to compromise his beliefs, or give even a little, is something everyone would like to see more of," Balf said.

Balf's favorite Taylor story occurred in Australia, when the cyclist was battling McFarland. Taylor was recovering from his worst crash, and was badly injured and bleeding on his bike. Despite the pain, Taylor still managed to race and just barely beat McFarland.

"What Taylor accomplished that day ... ranks with any story of courage in the world of sport," Balf said.

At the time Taylor was racing, cycling was the most popular sport on earth. Thousands of people would gather at races all around the world. Nye said that Taylor was offered \$10,000 for a single appearance in Paris in 1901. The average yearly salary at the time was only \$500.

Ritchie compared Taylor's impact on cycling to that of Lance Armstrong, in the sense that both provided the sport with a compelling, international star.

“[Armstrong] really put cycling on the map,” Ritchie said. “Major Taylor was doing the same thing more than 100 years ago.”

To get to that point, Taylor had the help of a few trusted individuals, including ex-racer Louis Munger and his wife Daisy Morris.

“It really was an extraordinary career that blossomed under those circumstances,” Ritchie said.

‘Larger than life’

Ultimately, the story of Taylor did not end happily. He had a brief nervous breakdown in 1904, and eventually separated from his wife. He died in relative anonymity in Chicago in 1932, and it’s hard to imagine that the continual trauma and stress did not exact their toll on him.

In his new book, Balf said he wanted to understand Taylor better, especially the “two-ness” that existed in him, and virtually every other black person trying to survive in the white world.

Today, Taylor leaves behind an impressive legacy, one that is just starting to be fully appreciated.

Tolman said that at least 22 cycling clubs in more than 10 states have become affiliated with the Major Taylor Association. At least 17 states incorporate him into their school curriculum, and two children’s books on Taylor have been published in the past few years.

Tolman said Worcester should take pride in the fact that Worcester was Taylor’s chosen home for most of his life. He was allowed to join the city’s YMCA after being refused earlier in Indianapolis, and was also allowed to race more freely in Massachusetts and New York.

Later this spring on May 21, a statue of Major Taylor will be erected in his honor in front of the Worcester Public Library. Tolman said that part of the reason the Massachusetts Legislature approved the money was because of this state’s “exemplary role in allowing Major Taylor’s talent to flourish.”

The sculpture, designed by Toby Mendez, is part of a larger event that will feature a panel and three-time Olympic Medalist Edwin Moses, who is the honorary chair of the Major Taylor Association.

Mendez, who has designed statues of other notable figures including Thurgood Marshall, Nolan Ryan and Gandhi, said he wanted to create a statue of Taylor that placed him prominently, ahead even of his sport.

That’s why Taylor is depicted in two different ways — on his bike, and standing in front of it.

“The sculpture celebrates his humanity, and shows that he was a proud man as well as humble,” Mendez said.

Tolman had the chance to view the sculpture last summer and was impressed.

“It’s magnificent – larger than life,” she said.

Just like the man.

*For more information on the Major Taylor Association, visit [www.majortaylorassociation.org](http://www.majortaylorassociation.org).*