

Freedom rider

Students study history of pioneering black cyclist

By Tim Waldorf

Long before Tiger Woods or even Jackie Robinson, there was Chicago's own Marshall "Major" Taylor, a world champion cyclist who, in the 1890s, battled racism to break world records in his sport.

Led by Naperville Central High School English teacher Marc O'Shea, 44 freshman literacy students have been learning everything they can about this obscure athlete's heroic tale.

"Our main reason (for reading about Taylor) has been to see how he made decisions and how he handled himself in the face of great adversity," O'Shea said.

During breaks from their reading, students even rode stationary bicycles in the back of the classroom as a way to empathize with Taylor's story. They clocked their best times for a half-mile, and compared them to his 1899 world record in the mile - one minute and 19 seconds.

On Monday, they were given an opportunity to bridge the gap between Taylor's legendary past and the present state of cycling, to learn firsthand how racism still impacts the sport.

Fresh off a win at the prestigious Athens Twilight Criterium, Rahsaan Bahati, a world-renowned African-American cyclist whose own life has been heavily influenced by Taylor's story, stopped by for a 90-minute interview with the students.

When he was a senior in high school, Bahati, then a junior racer, competed in his first world championship races 100 years after Taylor competed in his. Bahati said he thought that meant he was destined to win. He didn't.

"But from that point on, I looked at Major Taylor as like an angel, like a guide," Bahati said. "And everything that I would do I would compare to what he would do in certain situations."

Bahati said he has to because, 100 years later, his situation isn't much different than Taylor's. Unlike Taylor, Bahati has never been spit on or tackled by competitors. He has never had his success sabotaged by nails thrown in the path of his bike. His skin color has never kept him from competing in any race.

But Bahati, who is one of only a few black professional cyclists, often hears racial slurs directed at him on the course, and because he doesn't maintain as intense a training regimen as some riders, he has been branded as being lazy, he said.

So he has to watch everything he does.

"I just know that being an African-American in this sport that is dominated by white America, it leaves an impression not only on people who look like me, but on people who look like you, too," he said to the classroom filled with white students.