

## Sports Roundup

**Offbeat sports sagas, including one that is perfect for Hollywood.**

*Reviewed by Allen Barra*

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**MAJOR A Black Athlete, a White Era, And the Fight to be the World's Fastest Human Being** *By Todd Balf* / Crown. 306 pp. \$24

More than a half-century before Mallory's climb and nearly a quarter-century before Ederle's swim, black bicyclist Marshall "Major" Taylor was the fastest man on earth and perhaps the most famous athlete in the world. Taylor's meteoric rise to fame and his legendary 1904 showdown with white racer Floyd McFarland in Australia have been chronicled before, most notably by British journalist Andrew Ritchie in 1988. But Todd Balf, a former senior editor for Outside magazine, has written the definitive biography and done the best job of explaining a complex man -- Taylor was a poet and wrote an autobiography -- in a complex world. As a young man he was supported by a wealthy white family, and at his peak he was probably better known among white fans than black, though he was often vilified in the white press.

The highlight of *Major* is the confrontation -- or confrontations, as they faced off in two scintillating races -- with McFarland, a pugnacious bigot. Balf writes that their races "riveted the public's attention the way modern-day NASCAR does." Their races could not have happened in the United States in the early 1900s, when interracial competitions were not allowed. Balf recreates them in pulse-pounding prose: "Much to the crowd's satisfaction, the pace was torrid. . . . The leaders dashed around the track in excess of 30 mph, legs spinning furiously, backs flattened to prevent wind drag, and bodies canting precariously as they banked into the turns mere inches apart." Why does Hollywood waste time with innocuous sports fiction when real-life dramatic gold of this quality remains unmined?

*Also reviewed in this column:*

**THE GREAT SWIM** *By Gavin Mortimer* / Walker. 325 pp. \$24.95

**HIGH CRIMES** *The Fate of Everest in an Age of Greed* *By Michael Kodas* / Hyperion. 357 pp. \$24.95

**GOD SAVE THE FAN** *How Preening Sportscasters, Athletes Who Speak in the Third Person, and the Occasional Convicted Quarterback Have Taken the Fun Out of Sports (and How We Can Get It Back)* *By Will Leitch* / Harper. 295 pp. \$24.95

*Allen Barra writes about sports for the Wall Street Journal.*