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Major Taylor monument: A legend comes to life

Indy man says it was an honor to serve as model for sculpture of biking great

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PHOTO PROVIDED BY TOBY MENDEZ

WORCESTER, MASS.: This statue of Hoosier cyclist Marshall “Major” Taylor will be unveiled in his adopted hometown Wednesday.

As a bicycle racer, Simeon Commissiong was inspired by the story of Marshall "Major" Taylor, a black cyclist from Indianapolis who overcame tremendous discrimination to become a world bicycle racing champion in 1899.

And, for a brief period, Commissiong became Taylor when he served as the model for a sculpture that will be unveiled Wednesday in Taylor's adopted hometown of Worcester, Mass.

"It's a huge honor. I still haven't taken it in yet," said Commissiong, 24, a native of Trinidad who lives in Indianapolis. "He's such a great inspiration, a role model for people."

Taylor remains one of Indianapolis' most significant figures in social and sports history. More than a century ago, when track bicycle racing was a popular spectator sport, Taylor was its biggest star.

Like Taylor, Commissiong is a cycling champion. He has won races at Major Taylor Velodrome in Indianapolis and in Trinidad. He also competed in Indiana University's Little 500 as a member of Team Major Taylor, a squad named in honor of the cyclist.

In a twist of fate, a sculptor's quest to create a realistic monument of Taylor led him to Indiana, where Taylor got his start as a racer in the 1890s.

Toby Mendez, the sculptor hired by the Massachusetts-based Major Taylor Association, was researching Taylor on the Internet more than a year ago when he came across information about Team Major Taylor.

Mendez contacted the team's founder, Courtney Bishop, to say he was looking for a rider with a physique similar to Taylor's, Commissiong said.

Mendez soon found his model.

Commissiong is a sprint specialist with a muscular but sleek build. He's 5-9, 165 pounds, about the same size and build as Taylor.

"It was kind of like it was meant to be. . . . He was very familiar with who he was posing for and how important it was," Mendez said.
In May 2007, the sculptor drove from his studio in Maryland to Indianapolis and spent 2-1/2 hours taking photographs of Commissiong. Using calipers and a ruler, he took about 100 body measurements.

Mendez, whose previous works include sculptures of Gandhi and former Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, said he carefully studies photographs of his subjects but also needs a human model to create realistic three-dimensional art.

One side of the monument is a statue of Taylor standing aside his bicycle, behind him a relief showing a velodrome, or racing track. On the other side is a relief based on a 1903 photo taken in Paris that shows Taylor racing. Information about his life is also included.

Taylor was a devout Baptist who didn't drink and refused to race on Sundays. He was known for his quiet determination in the face of racism.

"He didn't retaliate," Commissiong said. "He just tried to be smarter than everybody else."

Commissiong, whose father was a racer in Trinidad, said he had heard of Taylor, but only after coming to IU did he learn details of Taylor's inspiring life and tragic end.

One of eight children, Taylor was born Nov. 26, 1878, on the outskirts of Indianapolis. For much of his youth, he lived with a wealthy white Indianapolis family that employed his father as a coachman, according to the book "Major Taylor: The Extraordinary Career of a Champion Bicycle Racer" by Andrew Ritchie.

Around 1892, he worked performing cycling tricks outside an Indianapolis bike shop. His costume was a solder's uniform which led to his nickname, "Major."

He soon began racing and would leave his hometown in search of top competition on the East Coast and overseas.

In the 1890s and early 1900s, Taylor was an international star at a time when bicycle racing rivaled (and by some accounts topped) baseball in popularity in the United States. Tens of thousands of fans regularly packed venues such as Madison Square Garden in New York to watch the races.

Taylor held multiple world records and won numerous races, including the one-mile world championship in 1899. "He took on the best, and he beat them at their specialty," said Peter Nye, a cycling author and Ball State University graduate.

Taylor drew huge appearance fees, such as $10,000 for racing in Paris at a time when the average American made about $500 a year, Nye said.

He also endured abuse.

In one race, a white rider was so enraged at losing to Taylor that he jumped from his bike and choked Taylor until police broke up the attack, according to "Hearts of Lions," a history of U.S. cycling by Nye. The judges then ruled that the riders should re-ride the race, which the injured Taylor was unable to do.

Taylor was also banned from Indianapolis' Capital City track after unofficially breaking two world track records in 1896. "Taylor offended white sensibilities," Ritchie wrote.

Taylor, though, also found help, from the white riders who helped pace him in Indianapolis and from his mentor, Louis "Birdie" Munger, a white man who moved with Taylor from Indianapolis to Worcester.

But the stress from years of racism helped lead to a personal breakdown about 1904 that marked the end of his cycling stardom, Nye said. "He just refused to ride anymore."

Despite a comeback, Taylor's life fell apart. He was estranged from his wife, lost his wealth and suffered from poor health.
Taylor died in the charity ward of Cook County Hospital in Chicago in 1932 at the age of 53 and was buried in an unmarked grave. A group of former bike racers later had him reburied at a marked site at Mount Glenwood Cemetery in Illinois.

"He held to the principles of tolerance that religion at its best encourages," Nye said.

Commissiong feels the same way about the man who shared his build: "He didn't fluctuate from his beliefs."