

## Major Taylor's legacy pedals on

By Daniel Lee

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As a child, Karen Donovan was fascinated by the story and accomplishments of her great-grandfather, Indianapolis native Marshall "Major" Taylor.

She'd spend hours talking with Sydney Taylor Brown -- her grandmother and Taylor's only child -- about how the African-American bicycle racer overcame intense racism to become a world champion in 1899.

On Thursday, Donovan and her two teenage sons were in Indianapolis at the site where Taylor was banned from a racetrack for setting a record. The occasion was the unveiling of a new state historical marker to honor Taylor's accomplishments as a cyclist and as someone who battled unfairness and racism.

"Now that I have children old enough to remember the story of Major Taylor, today has really special significance to me," Donovan said shortly before Thursday's ceremony. "I just want them to know everything that my grandmother told me."

The blue marker, just south of the State Fairgrounds along the Monon Trail near 38th Street, tells how Taylor set a record for the one-mile cycling race at the then-Capital City track.

The marker also tells of records Taylor set and races he won internationally. The marker says he overcame discrimination and, after retiring, wrote his autobiography to inspire others.

Kisha Tandy of the Indiana State Museum read a short excerpt from Taylor's autobiography during Thursday's ceremony: "Life is too short for a man to hold bitterness in his heart," she said, quoting Taylor's words.

Taylor, born in Indianapolis in 1878, died in 1932 in the charity ward of a Chicago hospital.

Taylor's 1896 record-breaking ride in Indianapolis was a key moment in his life.

Though unofficial, it was Taylor's first world record. But his performance also offended white sensibilities and resulted in his banishment from the track, according to Lynne Tolman, a board member of the Major Taylor Association, a nonprofit group that put up a statue of Major Taylor in 2008 in Worcester, Mass.

"That reaction, as much as the success, set the tone for the rest of his career: He was determined not only to be the fastest cyclist, but also to stand up for the principle of fairness," Tolman wrote in an e-mail.

A crowd of more than 30, including some in cycling clothes, gathered for Thursday's unveiling of the marker.

After Donovan spoke, she had her two sons -- Michael, 16, and Andrew, 13 -- use yardsticks to remove the covering on the new marker commemorating their great-great-grandfather.

Donovan, who with her husband and children recently moved from Hawaii to Maryland, told the crowd how her sons were learning about Taylor's life.

Michael, whose mother described him as a serious swimmer and student, said, "Major Taylor's legacy has really taught me, regardless of what you face, if you give it your best shot, then you'll succeed."



Family: Karen Donovan, great-granddaughter of Taylor, and her sons, Michael (second from right) and Andrew, looked at the marker dedicated Thursday on the Monon Trail near 38th Street, where Taylor was banned from a track after setting a record. - Matt Kryger / The Star