

SOUTHTOWN STAR  
Chicago, Ill.  
Sunday, October 18, 2009

## Recalling a champ: Cyclist Major Taylor

By Phil Arvia

The flagstone path into the Garden of the Good Shepherd is uneven. Some stones sit high and loose, others deep in the mud. There are no footprints marking the way toward this southern edge of Mount Glenwood Memory Gardens, but on the low spots there are tire tracks.

Bicycle tire tracks.

They point the way toward the grave marker of Marshall W. "Major" Taylor, the man who was Jackie Robinson half a century before Jackie Robinson, the greatest bicycle racer of bicycling's greatest era, and a man buried in 1932 in the paupers' section of this Glenwood cemetery.

Visitors are few.

"On the average, maybe five a year," Tammecia Smith, a cemetery employee, said Thursday. "A guy came out yesterday. A school came out earlier this year, saying they wanted to come out with the kids.

"Some of them are cyclist types, people who are just interested in visiting. The odd thing is we don't really have black people coming out looking for his grave."

Perhaps it's not so odd. And perhaps it will not always be this way.

On Thursday, Cycle Publishing released an updated and expanded edition of Andrew Ritchie's 1988 biography, "Major Taylor: The Fastest Bicycle Rider in the World." In it, Ritchie wrote, "A dead sport does not remember its own past."

He also wrote, "My most fervent wish is that this new edition of the book continues to focus attention on Major Taylor and helps to allow him the fame and respect that he so justly deserves. He should be elevated to his rightful place as one of America's greatest sports heroes."

Given the status bicycle racing held in the motor-free world of the 1890s and early 1900s, perhaps Ritchie is not reaching so far as we might think.

With the advent of the "safety" cycle - the earliest versions of modern bikes, vast departures from their high-wheeled predecessor - and, in the late 1880s, the pneumatic tire, bicycle racers were the fastest men on earth. Cycling, as a sport, matched or surpassed boxing, baseball, horse racing and golf in popularity.

Ritchie's book drops us into a world where bicycle factories, shops and clubs sprang up like weeds - and into an era where lynchings peaked in the United States (in 1892), the largest cycling club in the country banned black members (in 1894) and Major Taylor, at 16, won his first significant race (1895).

That 75-mile road race victory, near his hometown of Indianapolis, came amid the racist threats of his white competitors. Shortly afterward, he would relocate with a benefactor to more tolerant Massachusetts, and though he would not completely leave racism behind, his career blossomed.

In 1898, he held seven world records at distances from a quarter-mile to 2 miles, and by 1899 he was the world champion - preceded only by boxing bantamweight George Dixon as an African-American world champion in any sport.

In 1899 and 1900, Taylor was the American sprint champ and became, in Ritchie's words, "the first black athlete to compete regularly in integrated competition for an annual American championship."

Ritchie follows Taylor, with meticulously footnoted detail, to Europe and back, through superstardom and decline, from the high life to his death in the charity ward of Cook County Hospital in 1932. There are marvelous photographs from Taylor's own scrapbooks - Ritchie was given access to that trove by Taylor's daughter before her death - along with excerpts from the florid accounts of the day.

Ritchie even followed Taylor past his death, to 1948, when the cyclist's remains were exhumed and moved to a place of honor on the Mount Glenwood grounds.

Frank Schwinn, owner of the bike company, paid for service and the bronze marker that remains at Taylor's resting place.

The words upon it hint at the wondrous tale in Ritchie's book:

"Dedicated to the memory of Marshall W. 'Major' Taylor, 1878-1932.

"World's champion bicycle racer who came up the hard way without hatred in his heart, an honest, courageous and god-fearing, clean-living, gentlemanly athlete. A credit to his race who always gave out his best. Gone but not forgotten."