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Taylor biggest cycling star ever

“Raleigh Boys” to attend statue dedication

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Bill Humphreys, one of the “Raleigh Boys” who stormed Europe in the 1970s and helped set the stage for American cyclists such as **Greg LeMond** and **Lance Armstrong**, says the feats of **Marshall W. “Major” Taylor** cannot be overstated.

Competing at the turn of the 20th century, when blacks were excluded from many races in the United States, Major Taylor set world records and won the 1-mile world championship in 1899 in Montreal; he made more than \$25,000 a year, four or five times the amount of the best baseball players; and he overcame racism only decades after the Civil War — long before Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in Major League Baseball in 1947 or Congress enacted the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

“Tell that to a sports fan. That is a mind blower,” Humphreys said.

“I tell cycling people: There’s no statue of a bicycle racer anywhere in this country but there’s going to be a statue of this guy in Worcester,” Humphreys said. “This guy was bigger than anything we got going on right now.”

And Humphreys should know, he’s been on the racing scene for many years. He competed with the Raleigh-sponsored Century Road Club of America team that put Americans on the podium in European stage races, he has coached LeMond (the first American to win the Tour de France) and many other top American riders as the coach of the U.S. national team, he is a member of the U.S. Bicycling Hall of Fame board of directors, and he continues to coach and produce races across the country.

Humphreys will be in Worcester on May 21 when the statue of Major Taylor is unveiled at the Worcester Public Library. Many other cycling legends will be there as well, including LeMond and former Raleigh team member **John Howard**, a three-time cycling Olympian, an Ironman world champion, the world record holder for 24 hours at 593 miles, Pan-Am Games gold medalist and 18-time national champion who was inducted into the U.S. Bicycling Hall of Fame in 1989, the same year as Major Taylor.

“I’m a big fan of Major Taylor and I’m eager to be there for that,” said Howard, who may be the most acclaimed member of the “Raleigh Boys.”

“I’m excited about paying homage to the first acclaimed black athlete,” Howard said. “He did so much to champion civil rights, not so much as a cause but as a matter of survival in his heyday.”

Howard said he first learned about Major Taylor in an article in Sports Illustrated in the 1960s. He said he was immediately intrigued and has traveled the globe collecting information about the world champion — from Australia, where Major Taylor raced for several seasons, to the bibliothèques in Paris — and interviewing people,



ROBERT F. GEORGE FILE PHOTO

Members of the “Raleigh Boys” pose for a photo after a Fitchburg Longsjo Classic race in 1974. Standing, from left, are Dave Chauner, Doug Dale, Bill Humphreys, John Howard, Stan Swaim and John Allis. Kneeling is Fliio Waldteufel.

including Taylor's daughter, Sydney Taylor Brown, for a book he plans to write.

"It's been a sports obsession with me," he said. "I was inducted into the Bicycling Hall of Fame at the same time as Major Taylor."

Taylor, who was sometimes called the "Colored Cyclone," moved from Indianapolis to Worcester early in his career. The rising star refused to get dragged down by the bias he encountered. In addition to the tactical hostility on the bike, he experienced threats and assaults from white riders and was refused entry by some Southern race promoters during Jim Crow segregation.

Despite the adversity, Taylor set sprint records, won a world championship, became the national professional track champion in 1900 and won 42 of 57 meets in Europe in 1901. In addition to his achievements on the bike, Howard and Humphreys said, Taylor made bicycle racing contributions regarding training, nutrition and technological improvements.

"This is a time for everybody to know, not just cyclists, about Major Taylor," Humphreys said. "In the process, they'll understand how big the sport was at that time."

When Major Taylor was racing, cycling was at a peak, attracting Americans to velodromes like they are drawn to baseball parks today. There were an estimated 20 velodromes in New England around 1900, and 50 or 60 on the East Coast. The velodrome in Newark, N.J., for example, held 25,000 people, and Madison Square Garden was packed for cycling events.

"If you couldn't get a ticket to that, you went and got a ticket to the Dodgers or the Yankees, and Major Taylor was in the middle of that," Humphreys said.

In recognition of Taylor's achievements, a bicycle race held in 1980 and 1981 was named for Taylor. Humphreys, one of the organizers of the "Worcester Whirlwind" race, said the event drew 10,000 people downtown. He said the race program had a page of information about Taylor and Rider No. 1 was dedicated to the former Worcester racer.

"In that day and age, riders were becoming aware of who he was," said Humphreys, who was the technical director for the race and also competed in 1980. While Humphreys was helping to inform cyclists about the achievements of Major Taylor, he could see the popularity of cycling beginning to grow.

In 1981, Humphreys told the Telegram or Gazette that the popularity of cycling was about to take off in the United States. He said: "The economics and dynamics are right. The way the gas situation is and with the ecology and physical fitness movements, more and more people are getting interested in riding. I think that by 1984 you will see it booming and by 1989 I think it will have surpassed running."

So, was it sheer optimism or clairvoyance? He predicted that road stage races would become popular in America, which has occurred with events such as the Tour of California and the Tour of Georgia; and that Americans' success in European stage races, such as the Tour de France and Tour of Italy, would make those events interesting to more Americans and increase the popularity of the sport.

While discussing the Worcester Whirlwind race in 1981, he said, "Right now we have the races through downtown to get people interested ... to let them see the speed and the power and to educate them about bicycles and racing. Later I think you'll see the kind of touring (cross country) races that are so popular in Europe. I think the time is right for it."

Howard predicts that track racing, so popular in the time of Major Taylor, will also begin to boom in popularity in the United States, as it is now in Europe. He said there are only a couple of velodromes on the East Coast, but he expects more to pop up around the country.

"I think we'll get more and I find it very exciting," Howard said. "It's the old concept, if you build it they will come. It's just a matter of time."

"The sport is finally kicking into high gear and I think the stage races have a lot to do with that. ... I think it will bring us back full circle to track racing," he said.