

## Vails salutes Major Taylor

### World-class cyclist to help honor Worcester legend

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Quicker than a kangaroo, Nelson “the Cheetah” Vails jumped at the opportunity to race in Australia. When the Harlem native was invited to compete in a series of track cycling races Down Under in 1985, more than 80 years after Marshall W. “Major” Taylor made his first trip to Australia, he was more focused on winning races than succeeding the 1899 world champion.

“I was told I was following in his footsteps,” said Vails, the first black cyclist to compete at the world-class level since Major Taylor. “It was cool. It was good. I can appreciate that now, but at the time I was just a kid racing.”

In 1984, Vails, who was called “the Cheetah” because he was the fastest cat on the track, captured the silver medal in the individual 1,000-meter sprint at the Summer Olympic Games in Los Angeles. A promoter subsequently invited him to Australia to race at velodromes across the country, much like Major Taylor had done at the turn of the 20th century.

In the land of marsupials — kangaroos, koalas and wombats — the Cheetah was the star. Vails went from track to track, racing the champion of each venue. The tour promoted Vails as the next Major Taylor and described the event as retracing Taylor’s footsteps, including a race in Sydney, where Taylor’s wife, Daisy, gave birth to a daughter. She was named Sydney, after the city.

As he traveled from Queensland to Tasmania, Vails heard Australian cycling enthusiasts talk about the achievements of Major Taylor and he was amazed how much they knew about “the Worcester Whirlwind.”

Vails had heard comparisons to Major Taylor since he began winning races at T-Town, the Lehigh County Velodrome in Trexlertown, Pa., but the significance would not sink in for years to come.

“People would always say, ‘Do you know of Major Taylor? You could be like that someday,’ ” said Vails, who will be attending the Major Taylor statue dedication with many other cycling legends Wednesday at the Worcester Public Library.

“I was an African-American cyclist hearing stories about someone before me. People were saying you could follow in his footsteps. I was young, I thought, yeah, that’s great,” Vails said. “It was really hard for me to harness until I realized I could be good at this.”



1984 AP FILE PHOTO

Silver medalist Nelson Vails, left, and gold medalist Mark Gorski of the United States hold an American flag at the 1984 Summer Olympic Games in Los Angeles

## Major Taylor statue dedication

**Where:** Worcester Public Library  
at 3 Salem Square.

**When:** Noon Wednesday.

**Who will be there:** Greg  
LeMond, Edwin Moses, Bill  
Humphreys, John Howard,  
Nelson Vails.



Vails, a former New York City bike messenger who played a messenger in the 1986 film “Quicksilver” with Kevin Bacon, began to realize his world-class abilities in the early 1980s, when he went from New York state sprint champion to a national championship contender. Vails would go on to win a gold medal at the Pan American Games in 1983, a silver medal at the '84 Olympics, national championships in '84 and '85, and a silver medal at the '85 world championships in Italy, among other cycling achievements.

Though he was competing at a level Taylor dominated, Vails would never face the widespread racism confronted by the “Colored Cyclone,” as Taylor was sometimes called. “He did it before anyone. He accomplished something that black athletes won’t touch,” Vails said.

Taylor, who was given the nickname “Major” because he wore a military uniform while performing bicycle stunts outside an Indianapolis bike shop as a teenager, moved from Indianapolis to Worcester with his employer and racing manager Louis “Birdie” Munger in 1895. Munger planned to establish a bicycle factory in Worcester but the move was also made because Massachusetts was considered a more tolerant region in the era of Jim Crow segregation.

In his autobiography written in 1929, Taylor wrote: “I was in Worcester only a short time before I realized that there was no such race prejudice existing among the bicycle riders there as I had experienced in Indianapolis.”

Taylor was refused entry in some races, and experienced threats and assaults from white riders, but he refused to get dragged down by the bias. He went on to set seven world records and win the 1-mile world championship in Montreal in 1899, not long removed from the Civil War and decades before Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in Major League Baseball in 1947.

“I can see him excelling in that because he could. It was naturally easy for him because he seems to have been strong-minded,” Vails said of Taylor.

“I never had to deal with any hurdles like that in all my travels,” he said.

Though he didn’t face the racism of Taylor’s era, Vails said he was the only black competing at the national and international level when he was racing. After competing in races with other black cyclists at Central Park and Prospect Park in Brooklyn, Vails found he was the only black racer at the world-class level.

“It was never a black and white thing for me,” Vails said. “I wasn’t raised that way. I never had that issue. I never had a racial issue the entire time I was racing.”

“People would say, ‘Doesn’t it feel strange to be the only black cyclist,’ but I never looked at it that way,” Vails said.

Vails said he has learned a lot about Major Taylor over the years, especially when he raced in the Major Taylor Velodrome in Indianapolis. He is looking forward to seeing the statue of Major Taylor unveiled in Worcester and considers any comparison to him a great compliment.

“It’s pretty neat to be mentioned in the same sentence as Major Taylor. It’s an honor,” Vails said. “I did it for the love of the sport not because I was trying to follow in his footsteps. If he was alive at the time, it would have been nice to have him see me compete.”

In returning to Central Massachusetts, Vails recalled that he competed in the Fitchburg Longsjo Classic at least three or four times and believes he won it as a Category 3 racer in the early 1980s.

The statue dedication will take place at noon Wednesday at the Worcester Public Library at 3 Salem Square. Also attending the event will be three-time Tour de France winner Greg LeMond, former “Raleigh Boys” Bill Humphreys and John Howard, three-time Olympic medalist Edwin Moses, some of Major Taylor’s relatives, as well as state and local officials. There will also be a panel discussion at 7 p.m. at the library on “Race, Sports and Major Taylor’s Legacy.”